

Putting the Cross Before Ourselves

1 Corinthians 6:1-11

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I want to look this morning at the first half of First Corinthians 6. We're now in the middle of a section where St. Paul calls the Corinthian Church to account for a number of problems – not things they wrote him about, but things that have been reported to Paul, probably by mutual friends who were visiting in Corinth. All of them are problems that show that the Corinthians were failing to be what the Church is supposed to be – they weren't being true to their calling and as a result they were not only getting side-tracked from their calling and ministry, but they were damaging the witness of the wider church. The first issue Paul addressed was their tolerating the man who was sleeping with his step-mother. Paul addressed the issue of discipline – for the benefit of the unrepentant sinner and for the benefit of the Body – and he told them: “Throw him out. Send him back to the world that he might die to the flesh and his soul be saved in the end.”

If you were here last week, you'll remember that St. Paul warned them about the fact that they were busy pointing their fingers out at the sinners in the world, while ignoring the unrepentant sinners in their midst. And so Paul had told them. Judging the world isn't the Church's business. God's going to take care of that. The Church needs to be about judging herself – judging those in her midst. (How often do we do just what the Corinthians were doing? We ignore our own sins and the sins of our brothers and sisters, while throwing a fit about the sins that go on outside the church. That's called hypocrisy and it's rooted in self-righteousness. It's what happens, just as it did for the Corinthians, when we lose sight of the righteousness of Jesus Christ and the fact that we come to God *only* through him.) So Paul tells us that we need to work out our faith in such a way that we deal with the sin in the Body and encourage each other to holiness. That's the best witness we can have to the world.

Remember that 1 Corinthians is all about the cross of Christ: that we first live our lives in the reality of the cross and that because of that the natural result is our proclamation of the cross in our words, in our deeds, and through our changed lives.

But it wasn't just sexual immorality destroying the Corinthian's witness. Paul has more to say to them and to us. Look at 6:1-3:

When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!

Now it doesn't come across very well in English, but when St. Paul writes this, the Greek makes it clear that he's angry...really angry with them. Unlike English, Greek lets you mix up the order of words in a sentence so that you can emphasise parts of it in ways we can't. In Greek you put the most important part of the sentence first. In this case the first word in Greek is “dare.” Paul starts out saying, “How *dare* you!?! I'm told that you're taking each other before the unrighteous over your grievances!” Paul is utterly incensed by this.

We don't know the specifics of the situation, but based on what Paul says later in this section, we can gather that one member of the church felt that he had been defrauded – ripped off – by another member, and so he took that brother to court. When Paul says “go to law” he's literally talking about going to the ancient Roman equivalent of our modern courts. You took your grievance or complaint to the market place or to the local forum where the city's judicial magistrate would hold court, usually on a raised platform. And of course, just like we make court a spectacle on TV today, it was a big public spectacle in those days. If it was an important case, it was common for a crowd to gather and the parties involved, and sometimes even the magistrate, would play to the crowd. And so here we have two Christian brothers taking their problem before a civil judge and making their disagreement a spectacle for the whole city.

Now you'd think that Paul would go after the guy who had done the swindling first, but instead he goes after the guy who was ripped off – the “good guy” – and with him the whole church for allowing this to happen. “How dare you make spectacle before the world of your inability to live together as brothers in Christ!” And he reminds them that when Judgement Day comes, the saints will be gathered together with Christ to judge the world, the devil, and his fallen angels.

Scripture doesn't make it clear exactly how we'll be involved in judging men and angels, but we're told over and over in the Gospels and in the Epistles that we will sit with Christ in judgement over the world and the devil. That's an amazing thing to think about – that someday, somehow – we don't know exactly how, but we have God's word that it will happen – we will be called on by him to sit with Christ as judges over the world and the devil. The Corinthians had lost that long-term perspective. They were thinking about the here and now and not about eternity. And so Paul's saying, “You guys have what's in the overall scheme of things a minor dispute. The two of you should have been able to settle it between yourselves and failing that the church should have been able to settle it. But instead you're taking the problem to be settled by an unbeliever whom you yourselves will someday be judging? What are you thinking?” It's kind of like an accountant paying a kid just learning multiplication and division to balance his chequebook. How stupid is that?

Now it's not to say that St. Paul is telling us we can never go to court. He's not belittling human justice systems. Paul himself would appeal to the Roman justice system more than once when he was unjustly accused. In our world there are times when we might be falsely accused and need to go to court to defend ourselves. St. Paul isn't laying out some legalist rule about Christians not going before a civil judge. The issue is how we operate as the Church and how we deal with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Are we operating with the cross of Christ in mind or are we operating like the rest of the world? He goes on. Look at verse 4:

So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a

dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers!

Again, St. Paul is angry with them. Just as they were proud in their acceptance of the man sleeping with his step-mother when they should have been mourning the sin in their midst. Again they see nothing wrong with taking their problems to the civil magistrate and St. Paul says in very strong language, “*Shame* on you! How can you take the Church’s problems to someone who has no standing in the Church?”

Think about that. Does a non-Christian civil judge have any qualifications to deal with the relationships between Christian brothers and sisters? He has no concept of the Fatherhood of God and the family life of believers. He doesn’t understand that through Christ we are members one of another. Why would you take your problems to someone not qualified to settle them?

This is our problem, Friends. The Corinthians were forgetting who they were – and we struggle with this too. We have new life through Jesus Christ. We’re knit together into one body by his Holy Spirit. That’s the reality of the Christian life. But then we go on living the same way we did before. We have new life, but return to our old life. We are members one of another in the Body of Christ, but we go on living as if we’re still individuals, still just wanting to take care of Number One and make sure we get what’s ours. But if we’re going to call ourselves Christians, we need to live like Christians.

You see, as Christians, our relationships with each other as members of the Body of Christ are important – and sometimes that belonging one to another overrides the issues that used to be important to us before we became part of the Body. The world is all about putting *me* first – making sure nobody steps on *me* or *my rights*. And that’s what the civil courts are there for. If someone rips you off, you go to court, prove your case to the judge or the jury, and you get what’s *yours*.

But Friends, this is exactly what St. Paul is saying isn’t for Christians. He’s asking, “Isn’t there anyone among you wise enough to settle the dispute the way it should be settled between brothers? Someone who will take into account our life together in Christ?” It’s frankly amazing to me how little this is done in the Church, despite the fact that this is what Scripture tells us to do. I think the Church is afraid to do this for the same reason it’s afraid to exercise discipline or even faithfully preach difficult parts of Scripture: because those who don’t like it can easily run away to another Church that doesn’t hold her members accountable. But that’s not reason for *us* not to do what Scripture tells us to do.

We’re supposed to be showing the world what it means to have victory in Jesus, but in verse 7 Paul says it’s a sign of defeat that we would have these lawsuits among us. I think this even applies to bringing a disagreement to the church in some cases, not just to the civil magistrate. No matter who wins the lawsuit, the Gospel loses. I can’t help but think of the current lawsuits going on all over the place as a result of the present Anglican “Realignment”. Parish and in some cases whole diocese are going to court with their bishops, suing to retain their property. I’ve heard some justify it saying that the church and bishops they’re suing aren’t really even Christians – and they’re probably right. But does the world see it that way? Does the world understand the theological issues involved? No. The world just sees two groups who call themselves Christians taking each other to court – unable to get along or solve their problems. The world at least knows that Christians are supposed to love each other and that’s the opposite of what we’re showing them. What do these lawsuits do to the reputation of the cross of Christ? The watching world says, “You Christians aren’t any better than we are. You don’t have anything we don’t have. You have to have a judge to settle your disputes and force one to do the right thing. What do you have to offer us?”

But St. Paul goes a step further. What if you go the alternative route? What if you let yourself suffer wrong? What if you let yourself be defrauded? Stop thinking about yourself, about your rights, about just today. Start thinking with a Kingdom perspective. Think with eternity in mind. Is your getting yours really all that

important when you consider the damage it might bring to the cause of the Kingdom of God? Is your going to court to get what belongs to you going to give the Body of Christ a black eye? If you put things in an eternal perspective, what’s the loss of a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand dollars – or even the loss of your church property – if in the end the whole cause of Christ and the Gospel are going to look like something ugly in the eyes of those who need more than anything to see them as beautiful?

So Paul calls the Corinthians back to an awareness of what they do as believers in the eyes of the world when they fall into this aggressive, self-centred, self-serving defensive mindset that insists on getting what’s theirs at any cost. Henry Ironside tells a wonderful story to illustrate this point. When he was a young boy his mother took him to a Plymouth Brethren meeting. The Brethren were, at least in the past, known for following Scripture in this area. One man was bringing up his complaint with a brother before the Church and things got really heated. At one point the man stood up, shook his fist, and said, “I don’t care what the rest of you do. I want my rights! That’s all! I just want my rights!”

An elderly member sitting in the front row turned around and said, “Your rights, brother, is that what you want, your rights? Why the Lord Jesus didn’t come to get his rights. He came to get his wrongs, and he got them.” Dr. Ironside said that he always remembered how the first man stood there thinking for a little while and then dropped his head and said, “You’re right, brother, you’re right. Settle it any way you like.” And the whole thing was settled in a few minutes.

I know that that’s a hard thing for a lot of us to hear. And yet as believers we can never forget that God calls us to show the world a different way of living – and part of that different way is that we’re willing to surrender our personal rights for the cause we serve. St. Paul develops this more and more as we go along in 1 Corinthians, but this is the same principle that Jesus teaches us when he tells us to turn the other cheek. It doesn’t mean that we’re called to be doormats, but it does mean that when we find ourselves in a dispute our first thought shouldn’t be protecting our rights, but first and

foremost we should be asking what will best serve the cause of Christ and the Church's mission to the world. It might mean a personal loss, but we need to remember that faith in Christ is for more than just our spiritual salvation. Faith in Christ means we trust him in *all* things – even to take care of us when for the sake of the cross we allow ourselves to be taken advantage of.

I worked one summer as a cashier in a family-owned hardware store. They had a policy of not getting into disputes with customers or vendors. Even when it was obvious they were being taken advantage of, the company policy was to just settle the problem by giving the customer or the vendor what he wanted. I thought it was a crazy policy, because over and over again I saw us getting ripped off. Customers would come in and make outrageous demands, but our manager would always just tell them, "Okay." I asked one of the owners about it. He said that the policy started with their father. They were all Christians and their father had held the policy as a way to witness his faith and had found that in the days when he dealt with customers and vendors himself, his willingness to settle disputes this way often opened up the door to sharing his faith. Are *we* willing to trust Christ and operate like that?

Paul goes on in verse 9:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 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.

St. Paul takes us back to the cross. If the Church is going to be the Church, *we need to remember who we are*. The mission of the church is to glorify God and to proclaim the cross to the world – to the unrighteous. And we do it not because we're righteous in and of ourselves – we can never be righteous on our own. We do it by showing the world what Jesus Christ has done for us through the cross.

There was a time when each of us was counted among the unrighteous. We were sexually immoral, we were idolaters, we were adulterers, we were homosexuals, we were thieves, we were greedy, we were drunkards, we were revilers, we were swindlers. We were all just like the unrighteous – the unredeemed – in the world. At one point we were enemies of God. At one point we had no inheritance in his Kingdom.

And yet, Paul says, at some point God picked each of us up – picked us up out of the filth of our own sin – through the blood of Christ he washed us clean, he declared us just, and is working to sanctify us – to make us holy – to make us like Jesus.

And yet how often do we return to the muck and mire of our sin? And how often do we return to the mire in full view of the entire world, returning to our old way of life, to unrighteousness, failing to trust in God, and destroying our witness for Christ and shaming the Church? That's exactly what was happening in Corinth as believers fought with each other to make sure they got what was theirs.

In contrast think back to the story of Zacchaeus the tax collector. Jesus was visiting Jericho and passing through town he saw Zacchaeus sitting up in a tree trying to get a look. So Jesus called him down and went home with him for lunch, and after becoming a follower of Christ, Zacchaeus started repaying the people he had stolen from, and not just the amount he had stolen, but giving them back *four times* what he had taken. He wasn't concerned about what was his by right, and because of that there wasn't a doubt in anyone's mind about Zacchaeus' faith in Jesus – it changed his life. And this is what Paul's getting at. He wrote to Timothy saying, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord *depart from iniquity*" (2 Timothy 2:19). That's the consistent message of Scripture from beginning to end: God redeems us from the consequences of our sins, that we might sin *no more*.

You can tell a Christian – a follower of Christ – because he or she is no longer controlled by the sins they once walked in. The Christian was once a drunkard, or sexually immoral, or a swindler, *but not anymore*. Those who profess Christ but

go on living under the control of sin are saying by their testimony that they really are not Christians.

St. James asks, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?... some will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works" (James 2:14, 18). Remember, Christianity isn't about fire insurance. Faith in Christ isn't a "Get out of Hell Free" card. It's about being saved unto love and good works – about being saved by Jesus Christ to enter his service to make him your Lord and Master. He wants to save you and me, but he also wants to work through our witness to save others. The Church is about that witness, as we gather together to give praise to Jesus Christ for what he's done for us and to live out our new life together, exhorting one another to love and to good works. It's as our lives are changed by the indwelling Holy Spirit and we become willing to give up our rights so that we can live for others – so that we can become their servants – that the world starts to sit up and take notice. That's when people see the difference between the Church and the world and come looking for new life themselves. That's what we need to be about as the Body of Christ.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, help us to understand that redemption is not merely a rescue from the consequences of our sins, but that it's also a call to a new kind of life – to a life that seeks to follow in the footsteps of Christ and to a life of unity, one with another, in your Spirit, that your people might be a witness of your glory and the saving power of your Son to the world around us. We ask you to renew our minds that we might always seek to put the cross of Christ first in everything we do, that we might be his faithful witnesses. We ask this in his name. Amen.