

Study 8. 1 Cor 6:1-11

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The Christian community's way of life must line up with the gospel they claim to believe

Observation and interpretation

Read 1 Corinthians 6:1-6.

This passage, tragically, assumes 'disputes' (or 'grievances' - literally, 'matters against others') in the church that have led to lawsuits.

Paul describes two categories of people: 'the ungodly' and 'the Lord's people'. (Notice that he doesn't fall into the trap of middle class Christendom, which divides on the basis of 'the moral' and 'the immoral'.)

- What are Paul's reasons for believing 'the Lord's people' competent and 'the ungodly' incompetent to exercise judgement in the church?

Read Proverbs 9:10

- What does Proverbs 9:10 say is necessary for wisdom? Why?

Wisdom is knowledge of how to live well in the world. It's not just about pragmatics, but it doesn't exclude practical things as well - but it is also about goodness and integrity, in light of the character of God.

The Bible assumes wisdom is necessary for exercising good judgement (see Prov 25:12).

- Paul is shocked that Christians might take lawsuits among other Christians to those 'whose way of life is scorned by the church' (6:4), rather than one 'among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers'. What is the connection between a 'way of life' and lack of wisdom?

Reflection:

Read a certain way, this biblical teaching could appear to be an attempt to protect the reputation of the institution that is the church (check out 6:6). This, of course, is exactly what many denominations so wickedly did in the face of persistent child abuse by clergy: they exercised judgement 'inside' rather than 'before unbelievers.' Wonderfully, the truth has come out, and those decisions have been exposed and institutions rightly shamed.

Keep in mind, however, that Paul is talking about civil suits here. In the ancient world, most law was 'civil': there was no prosecutor, just a plaintiff and a defendant. You brought your own case before the court. In 'criminal' matters, though, Paul thoroughly upholds the role of the government (see Romans 13) and its role in exercising vengeance. It is hard to

imagine (especially in the light of the previous study) the apostle Paul supporting a church sheltering abusers of the weak and vulnerable.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:7-8.

Paul's great concern isn't with the reputation of the church. Rather, he claims that the presence of lawsuits - and 'cheating' and 'doing wrong' to one another - is a sign that the Christians in Corinth are defeated already. By 'defeated' he means something like 'living in a way that is utterly out-of-step with the gospel they claim to believe'.

- How are lawsuits within the church an indication that the church has stopped living with a Christian worldview?
- How does Paul's rhetoric - describing their lawsuits as 'trivial cases' and asking 'why not rather be wronged...cheated?' - help you answer this question?

Read 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

- Do Christians still sin?
- Have a read of this lengthy excerpt from Jerry Bridges' book, *The Discipline of Grace*, with this question in mind: 'what is the relationship between being Christian and sinning?'

To die to sin then means, first of all, to die to its legal or penal reign and, secondly, as a necessary result, to die to its dominion over us. ... There is no such thing as salvation from sin's penalty without an accompanying deliverance from sin's dominion. This obviously does not mean we no longer sin, but that sin no longer reigns in our lives.

How did we die to sin? We have already noted that we died to sin through our union with Christ. Paul said in Romans 6:10 that Christ died to sin, and in verse 8 he said we died with Christ. That Christ died to sin is a rather startling but wonderful statement. Christ did not die to the dominion of sin, as He was never under it. However, when He was made sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21)—that is, when He was charged with our sin—He did come under its legal reign and was made subject to its penalty.

When Jesus died, He died to the legal reign of sin. Through our federal union with Him in His death, we, too, died to the legal reign of sin. But because the legal reign and the practical dominion of sin in our lives are inseparable, we died not only to its legal reign but also to its corrupting dominion over us. Hallelujah! What a Savior we have who was able to not only free us from sin's penalty but also from its dominion.

The question arises, however, "If we died to sin's dominion, why do we still struggle with sin in our daily lives?" When Paul wrote, "We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" he was referring, not to the activity of committing sins, but to continuing to live under the dominion of sin. The word live means to continue in or abide in. It connotes a settled course of life. To use Paul's words from Romans 8:7, "The sinful mind [one under sin's dominion] is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so." But the believer who has died to sin's reign and dominion delights in God's law. The believer approves of it as holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12), even though he or she may struggle to obey it.

We must distinguish between the activity of sin, which is true in all believers, and the dominion of sin, which is true of all unbelievers. Sinclair Ferguson has written, "Sin is

not primarily an activity of man's will so much as a captivity which man suffers, as an alien power grips his soul. It is an axiom for [John] Owen [whose teaching Ferguson is summarizing] that while the presence of sin can never be abolished in this life, nor the influence of sin altered (its tendency is always the same), its dominion can, indeed, must be destroyed if a man is to be a Christian.

Therefore a believer cannot continue in sin. We no longer live in the realm of sin, under its reign and practical dominion. We have, to use Paul's words, died to sin. We indeed do sin and even our best deeds are stained with sin, but our attitude toward it is essentially different from that of an unbeliever. We succumb to temptations, either from our own evil desires (James 1:13), or from the world or the Devil (Ephesians 2:1-3), but this is different from a settled disposition. Further, to paraphrase from Ferguson on John Owen, our sin is a burden that afflicts us rather than a pleasure that delights us.

- Have the Christians in Corinth stopped doing wrong? What is the difference between 'doing wrong' and 'being a wrongdoer'?
- How are vv.9-11 a great warning to those who call themselves Christian? How are they a comfort?
- What does v.11 say to those who want to trust in Jesus Christ but feel burdened with the guilt of their sins?

Application / Implications

- When is it appropriate to bring another Christian before secular law courts?
- In vv.9-11, what kinds of 'being a wrongdoer' has the modern church focussed on? Which ones might we have conveniently overlooked? How might we in our community be in genuine danger?