

I Corinthians 1 - 7
Brotherhood and Behavior in the Kingdom of God
I Cor. 6:1-11

As I read Scripture to you, I want you to notice that Paul actually asks more questions than he makes statements in this passage, the series of rhetorical questions that imply that we should know the answer. He's writing to Christians. He's saying, essentially, you got to know this. And he does it through a series of questions. Would you stand for the reading of God's Word? First Corinthians 6:1 - 11. This is the Lord's word to us through the Apostle Paul.

When one of you has a grievance, literally a matter, a legal matter against another, does he dare to 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 than matters pertaining to this life to. If you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this 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, do you have lawsuits at all with one another? There's 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? 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.

For one more moment, give us, we pray ears, to hear what you're saying to this church so long ago. That's like us and unlike us. May we receive all that you're saying then and now. And we pray in Jesus name. Amen.

There is a man who is a soccer referee, and everybody thinks he's a really good referee at soccer. He has a firm but light grip on games. He makes sure that everybody gets to play the game and not be interfered too much by the activities of either too much physicality that's slightly against the rules or by too many whistles blown.

He's a great soccer referee. He also plays basketball and he is a terror on the basketball court. I don't mean that positively. I mean the complaints. He moans. He barks at the ref even when there's two minutes left in the game and his team is ahead by 14 points, the other team's ahead by 14 points. He's just disruptive, hard to manage.

And a referee finally said to him, you've a great reputation as a referee in soccer. Why do you make it so hard to be a referee in a basketball game that you play in? Surely as a referee you

have to know better? Now that episode reflects what's going on in first Corinthians chapter six. First Corinthians, chapter six.

Paul is asking a series of stinging rhetorical questions about eight of them, in which he says, come on, you've got to know that the way you're living, the way you're behaving is out of accord with the kingdom of God. Earlier in chapter five, he said, live like the new people you are. It's chapter five. And now he's continuing that theme in chapter six.

His big idea is that our knowledge and our practice should be aligned. Our knowledge and our practice should go together. If we know something, we should do it. If we are new in Christ, we should act like it. In other words, the Christian faith is always interested in connecting theology and ethics because theology without ethics is antinomianism, lawlessness just facts that make no difference in the world.

And ethics without theology is moralism. Go be good. Neither one of those is Christianity. So Paul saying bring it together now he mentions two kinds of sin. One is a cluster. He just kind of mentions a whole series of sins like greed and sexual immorality at the end. And earlier he mentions sin of Christian fighting Christian in a public way, bringing disgrace on the church.

Now he has three big ideas and I'm going to see them twice. Number one believers, by the way, that includes you will judge the world, and if so, we shouldn't need to go to secular judges. If we can judge angels, why would we need to appear before pagan Greco-Roman judges? So says Paul. Number one. Number two, the church is a band of brothers, and they should act like it.

If we're a band of brothers, then we should not exploit each other. And that day, one way to go to exploit each other was to go to court, especially when you're pretty sure you're going to win. Third, since believers are washed and sanctified and justified, we should act like it one more time. But actually breaking with sin. So the first passage, the first part of the passage, chapter six, verses 1 to 8, and Paul is dismayed that Christians are taking each other to court.

And we may wonder what's so bad about going to court. So let me say, first of all, that appeal to the courtroom has been a feature of Western civilization for centuries, and we go to court for all kinds of reasons that are, I think, just the way we set up our society. Things like immigration law and,

Patent law and other sorts of laws of that nature aren't really the kind of problem that Paul is talking about here. There are kinds of laws, financial complications that occur that we decided society are worked out with lawsuits and with judges. And it's not really what Paul's talking about here. He's talking about personal grievances that are fought out in front of secular people.

And he says that because he's interested throughout first Corinthians in the unity of the church. I hope you've noticed that in chapters one, two, and three, he's constantly warning the church about party spirit, about saying, I fall apart, I fall apart, Apollos. I follow surface, I follow Jesus and saying, my party is better than your party. That's been a constant feature.

Chapters one and two and three. And then a little bit later, we have a similar theme in chapter eight, the apostle says, when you eat as a believer, you're free from those old food laws. You can eat whatever you want unless it causes trouble to your fellow believer, in which case don't eat what you want. In other words, live like a community member.

Don't hurt the members of the community by exercising your freedom too much. In chapter ten and 11, he talks about, the Lord's Supper communion, and he says very pointedly, the way your observing communion, eating and drinking to excess, people who are wealthy bring in lots of food and drink and devouring it before other people come is humiliating those who have nothing.

That's verses 27 to 32 of chapter 11. Don't celebrate the Lord's Supper in a way that shows that you have more wealth or better friends than someone else. Live like brothers. So let's see chapters one, two, and three say it. Chapter eight says it. Chapter 11 says it. Chapter 12 and 14 both say it when they declare that the gifts we have, the spiritual gifts we have are for the common good.

Therefore, for all of you to prosper from. And of course, chapter 13 describes love. And what does love do but promote unity in the body of Christ. So Paul's constantly interested in unity, and he's telling us that when Christians go to court against each other, it is a sin against Christian unity. Now, when we read through Romans and Corinthians and Galatians and Ephesians, the letters of Paul, we often feel that there's a logic to them.

You can know why Paul's moving from point to point. And I have to say that it's possible to read First Corinthians and to kind of miss that. His biggest theme, even in these chapters, is Christian unity. You see, in chapter five we saw that there's this scandal sin that a man has his father's wife, he's got a relationship with his stepmother, and we we think it's all about sex.

But actually the main point of chapter five is when you leave sins and problems unaddressed, you tear yourselves apart. You cease to be the Or you don't live as the body of Christ is intended to be. Chapter five. Chapter six, verses 12 to 21, which will study in two weeks. We have Thanksgiving and then we'll study it in two weeks is about sex again.

So we think it's all about what's on Paul's mind. So much is sexuality. And chapter seven is about marriage and singleness. And that's his big theme. And then chapter six, verses 1 to 8 seem like a nonsensical interlude. Why is he talking about law lawsuits? Why is he talking about going to court against each other? But no, his main goal is the Christians live a united life.

That's chapters one, two, three, five, eight, 11, 12, 13 and 14. It is the great theme of the book that believers live in unity. So much so that he says in verse seven of chapter six, it is better to suffer wrong and to be defrauded than to win the day by fighting a fellow believer, and worse yet, fighting a fellow believer in Roman, pagan, godless courts.

He says in verses 1 to 4 that Christians should not let minor matters go and appeal to church courts if they must. Now why does he say this? Why is he so down on on Roman courts? And I

did say, Lord, you'll come tonight because you need to hear this. So here goes Roman courts. Here's the good news for people who practiced law for a living.

You don't have to give up your job, because Roman law courts were not, by and large, like ours. Roman law courts were set up to protect the powerful and the rich. How much? Very much. It was illegal for someone of a lower socioeconomic status or caste or class. It was illegal for them to bring someone of a higher class to court.

You simply couldn't do it. And if you were a person of wealth, or of standing or of rank, no matter what the merits of the case were, you were going to win the case something like 99.7% of the time. It was almost impossible for an ordinary person to win a law court case. Here's what one of the, philosophers and ethicists of the day.

His name is Petronius. And if you're a Harry Potter fan, it's not Petronius, it's Petronius. Just to clarify for you, Petronius said, of what avail are any laws where money, rules alone, and poverty can never win its cases? Justice is a public auction bought. We would say justice is bought at public auction. Justice is a public auction bought and gold settles everything.

The judges are privileged. To be a judge is to be a person of high rank. And the first job of a judge is not to decide between right and wrong, but to protect people of their own rank.

James says this about it in chapter two verse six. He says, are not the rich, the ones who oppress you and drag you into court. That's not rhetoric. That's just describing the reality of the Roman law courts at that time. For that reason, Jews would not appear in Roman law courts. They said, we're going to settle matters in synagogues.

We're going to settle matters ourselves. And Paul urges the church to do the same. Look at verses two and three again with me, if you will. It's up there for us, he says. Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world should be judged by you, are you incompetent to settle trivial cases?

It could be translated the minor matters of daily life. Don't you know that we're supposed to judge angels? How much more than matters pertaining to this life? Now, of course, the Bible tells us that we're going to stand before God as judge. We know that. We know that the Lord Christ is the judge of all. In the end, we'll stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

Jesus himself says that, but the Bible also says in this place, and hints at it in other places, that we, the redeemed, will help Christ somehow judge the world. And for some reason we don't know why. We'll find out. For some reason, God has decided that the holy ones of God will judge the world, number one and number two will judge angels.

I don't know why we'll judge angels, but we will. And if we can judge angels, if we can judge the world, help God somehow judge the world, then we can certainly handle small cases, small matters, matters of daily life and ordinary justice. Now, Paul says this in an extremely unusual

way in verse four, in our translations, as they sometimes do kind of calm down the language a little bit because it's almost offensive to our ears.

Verse four, it's not almost offensive. It is offensive. That's why the translators calm it down. So if you have such cases, these small matters between you, small financial issues between you, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? And in that phrase, who have no standing, is literally the despised ones of the church.

And we think, well, that's not right. Nobody should be despised in the church. And people wonder what it means. There are two possibilities. One view is that he means that the the lowliest, the the weakest, the most ignorant Christian the most the person, rightly or wrongly, who's kind of looked down upon in the church, even the weakest possible person in the church is a better judge than a Roman judge living in Corinth in the year 50 A.D., because those judges were not interested in justice, they were interested in preserving the power and the wealth of the powerful.

We might say it this way a child can judge better. A believer, a child from a believing family can judge better than a secular Roman judge who has no interest in justice. I'm going to ask you to just play a mental game for a second. Can you think of a nine or 10 or 11 year old who's interested in justice?

Can you think of nine and ten, 11 year olds who really think it's important? To be fair, I can. They shout things like, that's not fair all the time. They have a sense of justice. They want things to be done right in the classroom, among their friends in the sports world. Whatever it is, he says, listen, a child, a nobody in the church can judge cases better than a judge.

The other possibility is that when Paul says the despised ones, what he means is people we properly despise for no interest whatsoever in justice. That is to say, outside judges, the people, kind of the commentators, scholars kind of, hesitate over this. What are we to make of Paul calling people despised? he's not saying we should despise people.

He's saying, look, there are people you despise. Are people look down on. And the simple truth of the matter is this Christians, the main point is clear. The main point is we should be able to judge matters between each other, not go to public disputes. Christian against Christian before pagan people who have no interest in justice in the first place.

It is better to suffer wrong. It is better to be defrauded. That's what he says now he goes on to say this in verse five. He says, I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between brothers? But brother goes to law against brother. Christians have a sense of justice.

They know the most basic facts of life. God is just. God is merciful. So much of the judgment we make in life about matters hinges on simply not knowing those two things. God is justice. He wants justice in this world, and God is merciful. There is a time to not punish. And if believers

can judge the world, how absurd it is to ask people who have no standing, no understanding of God's justice, no understanding of God's mercy to judge us.

Paul uses the word shame. I say this to your shame.

I'm going to take a stab in the dark here and disagree with Lady Gaga. Lady Gaga says that shame is always evil. Should never make anybody feel ashamed and not let this Lady Gaga say it, but Brené Brown says it, too. In fact, she's written two books and put out dozens of articles and speeches on how evil, shame is.

It's always, I quote them, always lethal and always destructive. And because Lady Gaga and Brené Brown are, you know, mega stars in our culture, I have heard believers say you should never shame anybody about anything, and I'll shoot to them. And if that's your idea, let's not be wiser than God because Paul unmistakably uses shame. I say this to your shame.

In fact, in one place, the prophets say the problem with Israel is they have no shame. They don't know how to be ashamed of their misbehavior. How can shame be good for us? Shame can be good for us when somehow you see what you're really doing. You've been doing something for a while and suddenly somebody says, do you have any idea how wrong that is?

You have any idea how foolish it is for Christian to go against Christian in public before a judge? You can't judge.

Have you ever seen a parent yell at a child in public? I have. Have you ever seen a parent yank a child? I have probably you have to. Have you ever seen a parent yelled, a child screamed. A child yanked about a child's arm in a way that could hurt them, and then realize that you saw that happen.

They feel those eyes, and they realize that somebody sees that they completely lost it with their child. They didn't correct their child loudly. They screamed that their child.

And they pulled in their child's arm in a way that might have hurt them. And when they feel your eyes upon them, they suddenly realize what they've done and they know it's wrong. They feel shame, because shame is what we feel when we do something wrong in public, and it is seen as wrong. And suddenly you feel. We feel as humans, God has given us the ability to tell what other people are thinking.

We can tell that parent can tell that they think they've been seen as bad, out of control parents. There's some things we should recoil from because they bring shame. Now, Lady Gaga was not wrong about everything, nor is Brené Brown. It's there's there's no virtue in feeling ashamed that you forgot your belt tonight, which I almost did.

And there's no virtue in feeling ashamed that your hair is thinning. Did you notice the kids that came up to join the church? Did you notice how thick their hair was? I mean, those boys had. And those girls, they had ridiculously thick hair. Unlike some of us, there's no reason to be ashamed of thin hair. There's no reason to be ashamed.

If you forgot to tie your shoes, there's no reason to be ashamed. If your car has a ding in a place, it's very obvious. There's no reason to be ashamed if you're not really good with it. Your computer's. There's all kinds of silly reasons to be ashamed, but there is a proper reason to be ashamed. A man named Tay Lee Lao wrote an entire book about this.

The book is called *Defending Shame its Formative Power*. In Paul's letters 2020 book. Wonderful book helping us recover the value of shame, to have lawsuits one another before unjust judges. What letting the world see how we can't get along with each other is, Paul says, shameful. Better to be defrauded, better to lose money. Now let's see. What does it mean for us today?

I want to make sure that we hear the most basic point, and that is that Christians should be able to solve most of the problems they have between each other. They should go to church courts, they should go to pastors, they should go to elders, they should go to their elders who are wise in the Old Testament. Many, many times you read about problems being brought to the elders who sat at the city gates, and that's what we should do.

I think it'd be good if there were more Christians versed, well versed in conciliation and reconciliation, and Christians who, agree that if something goes wrong, they're not going to go to law courts against each other. The good Christians who are trained in conflict resolution and again, conciliation or reconciliation, those are very positive things. I don't think, however, it means that Christians have to leave the law practice because the way we've set it up in our country, first of all, the judges and our legal system has been shaped by people who are believers.

In fact, one reason why we kind of stumble over first Corinthians chapter six when it says, don't go to law against each other. It's not just because we go to law courts today, but Christians have been going to law courts for about 1550 years. And the reason they've been doing that is because around the year 500 or 4, 75, Christian systems became the dominant system of the remnants of the Roman Empire and what became the Holy Roman Empire.

In other words, church courts and civil courts had a lot to do with each other, and their laws were similar in many ways. Christians shaped the law system of the day, and they really sought justice and they really sought mercy. Therefore, Christians said, we can go to court in front of other Christians because the courts are just as opposed to Roman courts.

It's also true that we have and I mentioned it briefly, we have all kinds of other sorts of law. We have, you know, patent law and I can't read. I have a list somewhere and I can't remember them. But, you know, it's got patent law and, civil laws governing finances and governing contracts and governing inheritance and usually or number times there's no disputing.

And so it's okay to go to the courts, especially if people are really seeking justice. Another way to put it is a lot of lawsuits today are between groups of people, and you can't really tell when you get in there whether you've got a Christian in that group, you've got a thousand people maybe, and and 500 or 200 of them are Christians.

And so there you are. And it's hard to avoid. And it's okay. Okay. As a technical term, theological term. Now Paul shifts at least. So it seems quite a bit in verses 9 to 11, from lawsuits to life dominating sins. And I want you to notice something. Would you go back to verse eight for a second, old man or woman who's in charge of the screen in verse eight it says, but you wrong, you yourselves wrong, and defraud even your own brothers.

Now that word wrong means is literally due in justice. And then verse nine, do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? But the running theme is justice, doing justice and avoiding injustice. So Christians do not take other Christians to the law court because those are places of injustice. And in verse nine Paul says, do you not know that the unjust?

I know it's translated unrighteous, but it's the word is is a justice word. Do you not know that the unrighteous, the unjust, will not inherit the kingdom of God? Now when we look at this list, don't be deceived. You, the sexually immoral or idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, greedy, drunkards, reviled or swindlers will inherit the kingdom. There's a tendency for us to go to the, you know, red letter, hot sins, adultery and homosexuality if we want to focus on that.

But as I've said before, it's really important for us to pay attention to the sins that we ignore. Years ago, somebody said to me, you wonder what God's saying to the church today? Go look at the parts of your Bible that are not underlined. So let's look at the sins that are not underlined. The sins that are not underlined by us include greed, drinking too much, reviling, meaning despising everyone and everything, looking down and everyone and everything.

Being sarcastic all day long, seeing nothing good ever, anywhere. Being a constant critic. The sad truth of the matter is we have sins that we tend to ignore, and there are sins like greed and gossip, grumbling, gambling, in other words, that begin with G. And we do tend sometimes to abuse our Christian freedom and get drunk. There are Christians who have serious problems with alcohol.

Let's not focus on sexuality at the expense of the array of sins that Paul mentions. But we have to start with idolatry, because every sin list Paul has, and he has a couple dozen of them. Every single one has idolatry in it, because the root of all sins is idolatry. Now Paul often begins and often emphasizes sexual sins because sexual sins were so common in the Roman Empire in this particular case, he emphasizes, first sexual, immoral, and the word he uses is the broadest possible word for sexual immorality.

It covers every form of sexual misbehavior. And then he says, idolatry because idolatry, living for some other God is always at the root. We want to go our own way, live however we want to live. And that's the core problem. Now. I don't want to miss what we need to know, and that is in our day. It's not just immorality in general or idolatry in general agreed in general, but there is a lot of attention paid to the problem or to the phenomenon of homosexuality.

And so it's worth pointing out to you, I think, that our translation, which says men who practice homosexuality, actually has two very different words. The words are, if I may, malakas and our sin, a coy Thai. Now malakas means soft and it could apply to anything that's soft, like a cushion on your pew, or a very soft garment, a soft sweater.

But as we all know, the word soft has other meanings. And one of those meanings of if you call a football team soft, that's an insult. They're not very tough. They're not going to persevere. Or maybe a soccer team call them soft. It means they're afraid of a collision or working too hard. It's a little bit of an insult.

If you call a man soft, you can be saying he's effeminate. And in fact, the word malakas soft very often meant effeminate, and it meant someone who was a homosexual in Greco-Roman culture, someone who was, shall we say, playing the more womanish role in a relationship. And then the word are said a coy Thai comes from two words our sin, which means male and koi Thai koi, which means bad and it means men who bad men.

And that's, shall we say, the more active role. What? I go into this for a reason, and that is that Paul is covering the front. He's meant winning everything. So it's very, very clear. He's talking about people. Whatever they do in a homosexual relationship, I'm labeling all of it. So it's clear that I'm forbidding that Paul's forbidding homosexuality, as surely as he forbids thievery and greed and drunkenness and reviling and swindling.

Of course, there's some good news here, too. The good news is such were some of you. Such were some of some of you. Is that me? That means that he is telling us that many of the Corinthians were guilty of these sins. And probably many of you have been guilty of many of these sins. But you were washed.

The Bible sometimes called since, like this filth. And so it's appropriate that we should be washed of them. And then he says, you were sanctified, which means made clean. And then he says, you were justified, which means you were declared righteous before God. Now, if you know your theology, and I know many of you do, if you know your theology, usually we say justified and then we say sanctified, because first you're right with God declared right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, by faith alone.

And then you begin the process of becoming a better person, because justification is a definite final absolute act. When God declares you to be just in his sight, he says it because of the righteousness of Christ and His righteousness alone. As our confession and catechism say, and there's nothing you can do to alienate that. So the Lord wants to make it very clear.

You're right with me, the holy judge, by faith alone and then he says, you need to be sanctified. You start laying sins aside and be washed. But on this occasion, when he's just given a whole list of sins, he starts the other way and he says, you've been washed.

You've been sanctified. I'm remaking you and you've been justified. Such were some of you. Now, this is not mean that no Christian today is ever greedy does not mean that no Christian

today is ever idolatrous. The apostle Paul told the Philippians, Your God is your appetite. There could be appetite for food, or for drink, or for sex, or for power, or for ease or comfort or anything else.

Christians lapse occasionally into living for their appetites. You might say we are occasionally idolaters, and Christians certainly are occasionally greedy, and Christians are at times drunk. But it's one thing to be drunk on one occasion, another thing to be a drunkard. The word is very specific. He does not say, some of you got drunk. You said you were drunkards.

A drunkard is someone who is drunk all the time. And idolater. Someone who's following idols all the time. A swindler is someone linked with greed, a swindler, someone moved by greed. That's always trying to get something over on somebody. Get more of their money. Maybe you were a swindler and maybe you still swindle people once in a while.

But that's not who you are. Who you are is righteous in Christ. And as a consequence of that, because you're washed, because you're sanctified, because you're justified in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. We're the children of God. We're the beloved of God. We are the family of God. And we should live like we live like it.

By living lives free of greed, free of desiring to take each other to court and win the case against somebody else, by shunning sexual immorality, by shunning all of it, not in order to gain God's favor because we have it. This is who we are. We're the righteous ones of God. Were declared righteous day by day. We move more and more toward it.

It's pretty good. For a moment. Heavenly father, we thank you that your candor with us about how to live as Christians and give a lot of instructions to the Corinthians, and that means you give a lot of instructions to us, and we want to hear what you say and avoid trivial lawsuits and say, sometimes it's better to be wronged than it is to defend myself, as hard as that is for us, sometimes, certainly their sins, we need to shun sins we know how to commit because of perhaps long habit before we came to know you.

Now, Lord, we thank you that you washed us. You sanctified us. You justified us so that we are yours and we can live together as a body believers putting each other first. We pray that would be so more and more each day. In Jesus name, Amen.