

Lessons from Corinth

“Brother, I’m taking you to court!”

Part 3: 1 Cor. 6:1-11

August, 2013

“1 If any of you has a legal dispute against another, do you dare go to court before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? 2 Or don’t you know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest cases? 3 Don’t you know that we will judge angels — not to mention ordinary matters? 4 So if you have cases pertaining to this life, do you select those who have no standing in the church to judge? 5 I say this to your shame! Can it be that there is not one wise person among you who is able to arbitrate between his brothers? 6 Instead, believer goes to court against believer, and that before unbelievers! 7 Therefore, to have legal disputes against one another is already a moral failure for you. Why not rather put up with injustice? Why not rather be cheated? 8 Instead, you act unjustly and cheat — and you do this to believers! 9 Don’t you know that the unrighteous will not inherit God’s kingdom? Do not be deceived: No sexually immoral people, idolaters, adulterers, or anyone practicing homosexuality, 10 no thieves, greedy people, drunkards, verbally abusive people, or swindlers will inherit God’s kingdom. 11 And some of you used to be like this. 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.”¹

Apparently one member of the Corinthian congregation cheated another and the one offended took the offender to a public court. Paul seems disgusted with the whole affair and especially with the Corinthian’s acceptance of it (1-7a).

His alternative makes sense (6:1-5), the matter should have resolved within the community of believers; however his reason why this is so raises our eyebrows a bit, “don’t you know that the saints (believers) will judge the world...will judge angels...” (2-3). But I thought that God was to judge those outside the church (1 Cor. 5:13)! Yet, this text indicates that when that future time comes for God to pass judgment, somehow we will play a part; how this all works Paul doesn’t say. Because we will be given this kind of responsibility in the future, says Paul, judging the “ordinary matters” of this present life should pose no difficulty for us! Paul takes a sarcastic swipe at the Corinthian’s boasting in their “wisdom,” “Since you are so wise, surely there is a ‘wise’ person among you who can handle ordinary matters like this one??”²

The whole matter is disturbing: the dispute, their inability to resolve it and the church’s unwillingness to deal with it. However, even more disturbing is the impact that these matters are having on church’s reputation and witness to the larger community at Corinth. They are, after all, God’s “temple,” His “address” at Corinth (1 Cor. 3:16-17).³ Their sinful negligence has put their “dirty laundry” out for all to see – they should be ashamed! Rather than showing themselves to be God’s alternative to pagan Corinth (with its many “temples”), they have dishonored God and made a mockery of Him before unbelievers. “Since you refused to deal with this rightly, rather than make it public it would have been better to endure being cheated!” God’s standing in the community is more important than getting “justice.”

Often times Christians think like Corinthians; they see the world as divided into compartments. There is the “religious” compartment which takes in all things “spiritual” and then there is the “secular” compartment which takes in all things “ordinary.” We do the “spiritual” things within the walls of the church building or in our small group time or when we have personal “devotions.” But then we change “hats” and go off into the “secular” world to do the ordinary things of life. And the two are disconnected; seldom to overlap.

For those with this mindset, there are two different kinds of rules or ways of operating and behaving, depending on which compartment they are in. The religious, the Biblical, applies within the spiritual sphere but has no bearing upon the rest of life. When “out there” in the “secular” realm, they try to be a good “witness” to those around, which usually translates into not cursing, spitting, drinking, laughing at dirty jokes, etc. And if they feel really radical, they might

share with these secular outsiders some details of what things are like over in the “spiritual” realm; perhaps an invitation to church, “Come see what we do in our realm!” But all in all these realms are kept pretty separate. This way of thinking, believing and acting is called the “sacred/secular divide” and it is totally unbiblical.⁴

For some, like the Corinthians, the secular/sacred divide means that “what happens in the secular, stays in the secular.” In other words, sinning is no problem “out there,” because God’s “sacred” is not relevant, it doesn’t apply there. After all, I can just say I’m sorry to God later when I come to church, right? Paul doesn’t seem to think so. In fact, he says if you believe that, you’re deceived (6:9).

Now, I don’t want to erect a straw man to knock down. However, there is no question that for some Christians grace really is cheap and sin is not considered all that expensive; it’s ok to indulge in it because, “God’s got me *covered*.”⁵ Paul thinks otherwise. If you continue to practice sin with impunity, there is very real danger that you will find yourself outside the kingdom (6:9-11). Just so we are clear – that means you will be *lost*. If there was no danger of such a thing, then why would Paul give us such a warning?⁶

Yet, Paul is confident of better! He expects better because they have been “cleansed, justified, sanctified”- rescued *out* of their sin, not *in* it (Matt. 1:21). They *were* some of these things, but no longer (6:11). They are now to *be* – *His people*.⁷ The amazingness of grace is not that God is somehow fooled by it into thinking we are something that we are not; rather that He loves us where we are yet fully intending to transform us into something more as we tap into the Spirit’s incredible and fully sufficient resources. We are to *be* different (live right lives) because of who He *is* and who we *are* – all else threatens to disqualify us of our kingdom membership and dishonors the One who gave all to set us *free* from sin.⁸

Implication and Application

Some of this faulty thinking comes from our truncated understanding of what God is about in *His* world. It belongs to Him, after all. God’s kingdom is God’s love let loose to “turn an upside down world right side up,” and this means everything. For the Christian, then, there can be no sacred/secular divide because for the Christian *there is no secular*. ALL of life is holy, all of life is where God is at work, all of life is to be set apart to Him and transformed by Him – *all of life is sacred*.

Because all of life is sacred, then we must take seriously our responsibility to be God’s people in all arenas of life.⁹ This means, of course, that we take our personal lives and our life together as God’s people with the utmost seriousness and that we live out the truth *in fact*. We can, we must; and anything less is to deceive ourselves. Right living, “holiness” is to be *in fact*.¹⁰

We need see the whole of life as an opportunity to show God’s heart, truth and justice. We are to “live right to see right” extended into even the most ordinary matters of life. We must work to overcome the sacred/secular divide. How can we do this, practically?

Here are some thoughts:

- We refuse to accept anything less than absolute integrity in all of our dealings in the marketplace. While this means dealing honestly, “truth-telling,” etc. it also involves larger concerns of public policy, economic systems, etc. as we relate with an increasingly anti-Christian culture.¹¹
- When those who call themselves Christians operate with less than integrity, we must in love challenge them to walk consistent with the truth.

- We need to challenge and re-think the way things are “typically” done around us and expose them to Biblical truth. Just because “that’s the way it’s done” doesn’t mean that it should be done that way. Within your workplace and your vocation, whether it be “butcher, baker or candlestick maker,” what does a truly Biblical alternative to “that’s how we do it” look like? How might you work toward change?
- We work for creative ways to deal with the issues that emerge among believers so that we do not dishonor God before a watching world. E.g., how might we resolve business disputes, financial matters, child custody concerns, marriage separation issues, etc. through the local church? Obviously, this requires a commitment to allow other believers to arbitrate these matters and a willingness to abide by the final outcome.¹²
- We make our ethos “grace without compromise” and we willingly put ourselves into the uncomfortable place of persevering with issues when it is easier to let things go. The excuse of “that’s not my concern” is what Paul goes after here. Of course it’s our concern; we are joined with one another in *one* body and therefore we have accompanying responsibilities.

NEXT! “Why can’t I have sex outside of marriage?” Lessons from Corinth, Part 4, 1 Cor. 6:12-20.

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¹ Holman Bible Publishers (2010-09-16). The Holy Bible: HCSB Digital Text Edition (Kindle Locations 58488-58505). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

² Fee, “The absurdity of the Corinthian position is that the saints will someday judge the very world before whom they are now appearing and asking for a judgment.” (Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 230.)

³ Paul is not talking about the *place* where they meet as being the “temple.” These early believers met in homes and in small groups; *they* were the temple.

⁴ Of course, I have stated the worst case; or have I? The cultural drifts increasingly away from God: so where is the church? Again, I suggest the little booklet by Scott Allen, *Beyond the Sacred-Secular Divide* available through YWAM Publishing, www.ywampublishing.com.

⁵ The unfortunate and popular notion in some circles that “God does not see me and my sin, He just sees Jesus” is not only a distortion of what those who hold to imputed righteousness seem to mean, but is simply a falsehood – at many levels. Such a view is rightly called “dis-grace.” God is not a liar and He doesn’t deceive Himself, He sees you exactly as you are – you cannot fool Him – so don’t fool yourself. Absolute self-honesty is not only how we align ourselves with the truth, but is the pathway to freedom and wholeness! John 8:31-32. (By the way, I find the idea of imputed righteousness, especially taught in this way, to be unbiblical and contrary to reason.)

⁶ This is not an isolated passage, there are many more.

⁷ I don’t believe Paul intends some kind of fiction; he isn’t pretending they are something they are not. Also, we must remember to whom he is writing; these are new believers emerging from a pagan context and learning to walk consistent with the truth that is very *new* to them. In this, we are not like the Corinthians. American Christians live in the context of previous generations of Biblical truth. All of this means that we are far more accountable than were they.

⁸ I am convinced that Paul would have been appalled by any idea of a “sinning saint.” If sin and selfishness is the root problem of the world, how is that God’s salvation would leave us *in it*? The redemptive mission of God (His kingdom) comes to undo sin’s tragedy and ravages, not endorse them through some theological scheme that leaves sin intact and undone in *this* world. Read and reflect on Matt. 6:10.

⁹ This is the implication of Paul’s saying that we will judge the world – the sacred “trumps” the secular.

¹⁰ If you have been taught some version of *inability*, meaning that you cannot but sin, it’s time for a reality check and a fresh look at the Bible. Begin with 1 John and Romans 8:1-17.

¹¹ Recent illustrations include the commitment by Hobby Lobby to fight the imposition of Federal guidelines that violate their Christian principles; also, the Roman Catholic church has taken a similar stand with regard to issues related to Obama-care.

¹² Some time ago, by means of a mentoring relationship with an older more mature couple in the church, we worked on a child custody issue with a young non-married couple. The goal was to find common ground and compromise, with right attitudes, and to avoid taking the matter to court.