

LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH: 1 CORINTHIANS

Week 8: Lawsuits and Prostitutes

ANALYSIS

- I. INTRODUCTION, 1:1–9
- II. A CHURCH DIVIDED: INTERNALLY AND AGAINST PAUL, 1:10–4:21
- III. PROBLEMS COMMUNICATED BY COMMON RUMOR, 5:1–6:20

- A. Immorality in the Church, 5:1–13
- B. Lawsuits within the Church, 6:1–11

Paul concluded the previous argument by insisting that the church is not to judge those “outside” but must judge those “inside.” That had to do first of all with the expulsion of the incestuous man; but it also has to do with another kind of “judgment” that must take place within the Corinthian church, namely in matters of everyday life where one member has a grievance against another. The church ignored the outrageous case of incest, but, amazingly, had no trouble taking one another to court before pagan magistrates for what were, in Paul’s thinking, rather minor matters. If, as Paul says, they will one day be judging angels, then certainly they should be able to settle minor issues that come up within the church.

Paul seems to be talking about various kinds of property or financial disputes. Note, for example, v. 7: “Why not rather be cheated.” Paul is not dealing with criminal cases which are to be handled by the state (Rom 13:1–5). Probably one man in the church had swindled or defrauded another man in the church (recall Paul’s reference to “swindlers” in 5:9). So the man swindled had taken the other to court in Corinth before the civil magistrates at the “judgment seat” (*bēma*) in the marketplace.

1. The seriousness of the problem, 6:1–3

(6:1) If any of you has a dispute with another, do you dare to take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the Lord’s people?

Paul is simply horrified by what he has heard (“do you dare”). The situation involves someone who is wronged seeking adjudication in the courts. The phrase “has a dispute” is a technical term for a lawsuit. The problem in this case is that the case was brought “before the ungodly instead of before the Lord’s people.” By calling the Roman courts “ungodly,” Paul’s intention is not to demean the Roman courts, as if they were corrupt. Paul himself used the courts on more than one occasion.

(6:2) Or do you not know that the Lord’s people will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases?

The absurdity of this for Paul comes out in this verse where he says that these “ungodly,” who will not inherit the kingdom (v. 9), will be judged in a far more important eschatological judgment by the “Lord’s people,” yet they are being asked to judge the “Lord’s people” over what he considers to be “trivial cases.”

Paul says: “Do you not know that the Lord’s people will judge the world.” Paul does not explain the details of this judgment, nor does anyone else in the NT. Possibly, it relates to part of our ruling function in the kingdom (cf. Rev 2:26).

(6:3) Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life!

The question in v. 3, “Do you not know that we will judge angels?” intensifies the point of v. 2. So inclusive will be our participation in God’s eschatological judgment that not only the world but even the angels will be judged by the people of God. Paul’s point is that in the future the church will sit in on ultimate judgments—even the judgment of angels.

2. The twofold sin involved, 6:4–8
 - a. Going before the secular courts, 6:4–6

(6:4) Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, do you ask for a ruling from those whose way of life is scorned in the church?

Paul does not mean so much that Christians despise pagan judges, but that they are those people whose values and judgments the church has rejected by its adoption of totally different standards. To go to pagan courts is to ask those to make a ruling among Christians “whose way of life is scorned in the church.”

(6:5) I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?

Paul begins with “I say this to shame you.” Earlier (4:14) he had maintained that his object was not to shame them, but to warn them. Here the object is shame, pure and simple. In a church full of pride and arrogance, where “wisdom,” suggesting superior spirituality, was a watchword Paul asks, “is it so with you that there is nobody among you who is wise, so that he might render a decision between the brothers?”

(6:6) But instead, one brother takes another to court—and this in front of unbelievers!

As in v. 1 the prepositional phrase “in front of unbelievers” involves bringing such matters before the civil magistrates in Corinth.

- b. Going to court at all, 6:7–8

(6:7) The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?

In this section Paul emphasizes the total defeat that this action represents: “Already (i.e., whatever the result of the lawsuit) it is altogether a defeat to you, that you have lawsuits with one another.” Paul’s point is “Whether you win or lose, the action itself is already a loss. For even if you win, you lose by not being able to endure injury, and the church loses by your action before the public tribunal.” Since this is so, Paul asks a rhetorical question of the person who brought the suite (plaintiff), “Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?” (cf. 1 Thess 5:15; Rom 12:17). The second verb “cheated” has the idea of “robbing, cheating, or defrauding” someone out of what is rightfully another’s (cf. 7:5). This word in particular suggests that some kind of property or business dealing is the problem.

(6:8) Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers and sisters.

Paul now turns and speaks a word of shame to the ones who did the defrauding in the first place. The implication of the warning that follows in vv. 9–10 is that such behavior is not only shameful but simply cannot be tolerated in the Christian community.

3. The basic misconception behind it, 6:9–10

(6:9) Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men (6:10) nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

“Wrongdoers” speaks of people who engage in a lifestyle of sin, not a single act of sin. Thus, Paul is saying that those who commit unrighteous acts as a pattern of life will not inherit the kingdom of God. Those whose lives are characterized by the kinds of sins Paul goes on to list have never truly experienced the saving grace of God and are thus still slaves of their sin.

4. The inconsistency of it, 6:11

(6:11) And that is what some of you were. 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.

Paul does not want to conclude on the note of warning struck in vv. 8–10 since it might leave the impression that he thinks *all* the Corinthians were actually still among “the wrongdoers.” In this epistle Paul often concludes a warning with a positive note (5:7; 6:20; 10:13; 11:32). Thus, he brings this whole matter to a conclusion by reaffirming: “And that is what some of you were.”

As part of their depravity some people experience homosexual desires (v. 9). That is, they be more inclined toward this kind of behavior. Paul says, however, “that is what some of you **were**,” because he believes in the power of God to transform human lives, desires, and inclinations.

The rest of the verse gives the basis for this premise: “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.” Paul’s point is that their conversion, produced by God through the work of Christ and the Spirit, is what has removed them from being among the wicked, who will not inherit the kingdom. These three verbs (washed, sanctified, justified) speak of various aspects of the initial phase of our salvation. We are “washed” from all the filth of the list of sins in vv. 9–10. This is probably a metaphor for regeneration (cf. Titus 3:5, “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”). We have been “sanctified,” that is, set apart from our sinful past. The dominion of sin over us has been broken. We have been “justified,” that is, declared to be righteous through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to our account.

C. Christian Liberty—Going to the Prostitutes, 6:12–20

1. Christian liberty and its proper boundaries, 6:12–14

In vv. 15–17 Paul will argue that one may not “take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute.” Apparently, some men within the church were going to prostitutes and were arguing for the right to do so. It is unknown whether these were temple prostitutes, in which case Paul may have gotten into this subject because of his warning against sexual immorality and idolatry in 6:9, or ordinary prostitutes, whose primary clientele was the sailors who docked at Cenchrea and Lechaeum, harbors to the east and west of Corinth respectively.

We do know is that men in the Romans world were free to carry on homosexual affairs and to commit adultery with slaves, prostitutes, and concubines, while a woman caught in adultery could be charged with a crime. The famous Roman politician and writer Cicero wrote, “If there is anyone who thinks that youth should be forbidden affairs even with courtesans, he is doubtless austere (I cannot deny it), but his view is contrary not only to the license of this age, but also to the custom and concessions of our ancestors. For when was this not a common practice? When was it blamed? When was it forbidden?” (*Pro Caelio* 20.48). The writer Plutarch argued that a wife should not be angry with her husband if he is incontinent and dissolute with a paramour or maidservant: “She should reason that it is respect for her which leads him to share his debauchery, licentiousness, and wantonness with another woman” (*Moralia* 140B). It was a common Roman view that sex within marriage was for procreation, not for pleasure, and that sexual pleasure and gratification for men was to be found in relations with slaves, prostitutes or other people outside of marriage.

(6:12) *“I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”—but I will not be mastered by anything.*

Paul does not begin by attacking their wrong behavior; rather, he confronts the theology on which that behavior is based. “I have the right to do anything” is almost certainly a Corinthian theological slogan, and is indicated as so by the quotation marks in the NIV. This is confirmed by the way Paul cites it again in 10:23; in both cases he qualifies it so sharply as to negate it—at least as a theological absolute.

Where this slogan comes from is not clear. One contemporary writer said, using the same language as Paul, “The wise are permitted to do anything whatsoever they wish” (Dio Chrysostom, *Orations* 14.17). Since Paul himself was a champion of Christian freedom (Rom 14:1–15:13; 1 Cor 8–10), it is possible that this slogan has been adapted from what the Corinthians have heard from him, ignoring the fact that Paul was speaking about *Christian* freedom, that is, freedom in certain nonessentials like food, days, circumcision, etc., not with Christian morals. Another suggestion is that this is another expression of the Corinthians’ triumphalist theology, the idea that they have arrived (“Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign” 4:8).

The Corinthians, at least some of them, feel that they have the right or authority to act as they please, even if it is contrary to Paul’s teaching. They feel they have the freedom to act as they pleased without restraint. For Paul this is not freedom at all, but a form of bondage.

With his qualifier “but not everything is beneficial,” Paul says that freedom is not to be for self but for others. The real question is not whether an action is “lawful” or “right,” but whether it is good, whether it benefits.

The Corinthians are saying, “I have freedom to act with regard to all things”; Paul qualifies, “Yes, but I will not be mastered by anything (or anybody).” If freedom or liberty is absolutized without qualification, it can become a kind of bondage. There is a kind of self-deception that inflated spirituality promotes, which suggests to oneself that they are acting with freedom and authority, but which in fact is an enslavement of the worst kind. This is obviously true if what one argues for under the banner of freedom is in reality morally wrong. Jesus said in John 8:34, “Everyone who sins is a slave of sin.”

(6:13) You say, "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both." The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. (6:14) By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also.

In contrast to v. 12, however, where Paul does not agree with their slogan in its absolute form, here he is in essential agreement. Both food and the stomach belong to the present age, and "God will do away with them both in the end" (NAB). But Paul will not let them take that slogan, which has to do with the irrelevancy of food restrictions, and apply it to illicit sexual relations.

Their reasoning went like this: "Since everything is permitted, and since food is for the stomach and the stomach for food (after all, God will destroy them both in the end), and since all bodily appetites are pretty much alike, that means that the body is for sex and sex for the body—because God will destroy them both in the end as well" (Fee). But their conclusions are completely wrong—on both counts: The body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord. "The body is for the Lord" in the sense that the work of redemption includes the whole person, including the body. If the stomach is irrelevant for future existence, the body itself is not.

2. The sacredness of the human body, 6:15–20

(6:15) Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!

In vv. 15–17 Paul explains his reformulation of their slogan in v. 13, "the body is *not* for sexual immorality, but for the Lord" by applying it directly to their going to the prostitutes. Verse 15 declares, on the basis of v. 14, that the bodies of believers are "members" of the "body" of the Lord and therefore cannot be joined to a prostitute, to become "members" of her body. Both are "bodily" relationships that imply a form of "union," the one with Christ through his resurrection; the other with the prostitute through intercourse.

(6:16) Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." (6:17) But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

Paul now proceeds to explain v. 15, starting with the sexual union of a man with a prostitute. "He who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body." Why is that true? "For it is said, 'The two will become one flesh.'" Contrary to the common view in Roman culture that sex with a prostitute was an insignificant matter, Paul disagrees, citing Genesis 2:24. There is no such thing as casual sex that has no enduring consequences, even when the partners have no intention of forming a mutual attachment. Paul argues that it creates a bond that has significant ramifications. While the union of man and wife as "one flesh" implies far more than merely physical union, Paul's concern here is strictly with the physical aspects of the union. To have sexual intercourse with a prostitute involves an illicit sexual joining of one's body to that of another. It is not the sexual union itself that is incompatible with union with Christ; it is such a union *with a prostitute*.

In v. 17 the illicit union with the prostitute is contrasted to the believer's union with Christ; "But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit." The believer is united to the Lord. It may be that the "spirit" is a reference to the Holy Spirit. Paul says in 12:13 that believers are made part of the body of Christ by the Spirit.

(6:18 Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body.

To this point Paul has been arguing against the Corinthians' invalid theological slogans. If one follows Paul's line of thinking, then the prohibition naturally follows: "Flee from sexual immorality."

But this prohibition is not Paul's final word. He offers one further theological reason, closely related to what has already been said, "the body is for the Lord" (v. 13). Now he argues that sexual immorality in particular is a sin against one's own body, which is "for the Lord" because it is also a "temple of the Spirit."

"All other sins a person commits are outside the body" in the sense that no other sin is directed specifically toward one's own body in the way that sexual immorality is. But are not other sins like drug abuse a sin against one's body? Probably, the best answer is that sexual immorality establishes a one-flesh kind of relationship with, in this case, a prostitute, which is "against the body" in the sense that it is contrary to the natural, God-given sexual function of the body in a marital relationship.

(6:19) Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; (6:20) you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

Paul now gives a theological justification for his prohibition against sexual immorality in v. 18. With the use of two images (temple and purchase of slaves), Paul reasserts that the body in its present existence belongs to God. The body is the present habitation of God's Spirit, which means by implication that one belongs to the God whose Spirit dwells within.