

When You Can't Get Along I Corinthians 6 6/2/02

There are a lot of passages in I Corinthians that have been interpreted in many different ways. Some of these differences have caused major divisions within the Christian community. We will start in with that over the next weeks. But there are other passages in I Corinthians where you read them and say, "this is a no brainer". Well, such is the case this morning. Take your Bibles and turn with me to I Corinthians 6: 1-11. Read.

The world of Paul was no different than ours in terms of the proliferation of issues that made there way to the court. There was a major difference though between the two dominant cultures that we find in the Bible. The Jewish community would never think of going to the civil authorities to settle their differences. The only exception is if they wished to get a verdict that included the death penalty. Going all the way back to Moses and the advice of his father in law we find a rich tradition of individuals who could settle disputes between two parties. Part of Judaism identity is this sense that we can sole our own problems without bringing a heathen into it. Now the Greco-Roman society was just the opposite in terms of the legal system. The whole process was like a spot for them. And every citizen got involved at different levels. It was a complex and highly unwieldy system fraught with graft and corruption. Word has come to Paul that disputes between church members were being brought to the civil courts and Paul's response that we just read, seems to be filled with exasperation. And Paul has three reasons why he is so upset with his brothers and sisters in Corinth.

First of all is the fact that their going to court was a poor testimony. Remember a key values that Christ called the church to reflect was loving one another as God has loved us in Christ Jesus. To go to court was a public declaration that at least one side felt that the

other had not loved them or treated them as they wished to themselves be treated. Now this raises a very critical question. To some Paul seems to be saying don't air your dirty laundry in public. In other words cover it up and keep it quiet. But that is not at all what he is saying. Deal with it openly and directly. This whole letter is an illustration about addressing problems head on. What Paul is saying is that within the family can be found individuals of sound mind and strong character who can mediate.

But there is a second reason for Paul. Going before the public officials is a declaration that the church has failed to truly be the church. Remember the great boast of the Corinthian church. Great wisdom, spiritual power and giftedness. Paul gives them a pretty good shot in verse 5 and is straight out about the shame.

You should be embarrassed about this. Back in verse 2 he speaks of our eventual role in Christ's coming Kingdom. To be rulers and judges. Now look at verse 4. Some dispute over this. I take this to mean that any one who is in Christ can serve as a mediator. You don't need a member of the ministry staff, a board member of whomever you consider the heavy hitters of the church. I think again that this is a practical issue. Now, some problems are very complex but I believe Paul would say bring in other believers not to take sides but to settle it early on. Too often we wait until we have drummed up support and split the church. Now are there times when the courts must be used. Absolutely yes. Some matters the law mandates we involve the civil authorities and Paul would say that is the government rightful expression of authority but you get the sense that these folks are at each other.

Last point, the fact that it had come to going to court was a demonstration that they had already lost. This is the tough one. Turn back to Matthew 5:39-42. Tough, tough

teaching. People over things all the time. It would be better to loose your things than to lose a brother or your testimony. We don't want to hear that. I was mulling that over this morning on the way to church. How much of my stuff has become more important than my faith community? We have more stuff than within the American church. How about our collective stuff? I have been so impressed by those who have lost their churches to fires in the last weeks and the strong declaration that the church is people not building. Buildings are simply tool for ministry that helps facilitate what God has called us to do. Practical conclusions. What then do you do?

1. You early on in the process gather three brothers and sisters that you both respect and present the issue.
2. Give them time to pray about it and seek God's direction through meditation and Scripture study.
3. Submit yourself to their decision. That's where the rub comes. If it doesn't work out the way we want then the problems begin.