

1 Corinthians 6:1-11
(Ecclesiastes 12:13-14; Matthew 7:1-5)
“Settling Grievances”

Introduction

Paul turns now from the scandal of immoral behavior in the Corinthian church to the scandal of relational conflict so out-of-hand that church members are suing each other in court. The church, which is supposed to be a picture of reconciled relationships and self-sacrificial love, has instead taken its quarrelling and division into the public square. Their behavior in this instance is yet another denial of the gospel they claim to profess, and Paul once again expresses astonishment and grief at what has been reported to him.

The thrust of his teaching is that the Corinthians must learn to deal in a mature and godly manner with disagreements and grievances, holding one another accountable, submitting to the wisdom of the community, and doing all things in a way that glorifies God, heals the church, and gives the surrounding world reason, not to hold the church in contempt, but rather to wonder – based on the mature and loving way that Christians solve problems – if perhaps the gospel is true. We will look this morning at what Paul teaches about the importance, in such cases as this, of examining one’s motive, of establishing the proper context, of asking the right questions, and of remembering the difference the gospel should make in our identity and behavior.

Body

1. A fourfold love is the only proper motive in approaching this subject (4:14; 13:1f).

Paul has already written that his motive in confronting the problems at Corinth is his love for them. Later in the letter, he will write that nothing – however spiritually exalted it may seem – is worth anything if it is not motivated by love (13:1f). And in dealing with grievances, where people tend to be both aggressive and defensive, it is crucial that we be motivated by a fourfold love.

Love for God: There is no particular reason for anyone to take seriously Paul’s claim that, “the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power” (4:20), if there is no difference in the lives of those who profess Christ and those who do not. We need to remember that the gospel has the power to change lives, and that it is the high calling and privilege of Christians to demonstrate such changes. When we fail to do so, we dishonor God.

Love for one another: If we love one another within the family of God, we will also want the church to be a healthy place of reconciled relationships. We will want our families and friends to experience the reality of forgiveness and compassion, mercy sufficient to let go of hurts and old wounds, willingness to walk again with those from whom we have been separated by conflict.

Love especially for those who have caused offence: As we saw last week, one of the reasons for confronting sinful behavior is in hope of the restoration of the offender. Our longing is for those who have offended to experience, as we have, the loving forgiveness of the Lord and to return to the embrace of the community.

And love for the surrounding world: And, if we understand anything of what the church is supposed to be as Christ's body, entrusted with Christ's life and ministry so that the world will know who God is, then we will love the world rightly, just as "God so loved the world that he gave his Son" (John 3:16), and seek to give no reason for the world to suspect that the gospel is all talk and no power.

2. A kingdom perspective is the only helpful context for addressing this problem (6:2-6).

Paul has told us in the previous passage that we are not to judge "outsiders" but to leave them to the Lord (5:12f), but the reason becomes clearer if we understand what he is saying. Those who are in Christ, the Bible teaches, will one day rule and reign with Christ when he comes again to consummate history and set things aright. In that day, Paul says, those who are in Christ will share in the judgment of the world – of all things visible and invisible. Beyond that, we cannot say much, for the Bible doesn't say much about this. Paul opens the door just enough for us to catch a glimpse inside, then quickly closes it.

However, Paul's argument is clearly this: You will one day have to show the very wisdom of God in judging the world and even in judging rebellious angels. For now, you are to learn to exercise wisdom, justice and mercy, within the church. Why would you go to those who do not have the wisdom, mercy and grace of God to decide your disagreements?

One important observation: The church in Corinth was surrounded by a pagan culture. When a society such as ours consists of a large number of professing Christians and often the court's judges and attorneys are Christians or people with Christian values, there may be times when Christians are forced to seek the judgment of the court to resolve a point of law. However, bitterness, acrimony, fighting to get one's way, acting in anger or out of revenge, have no place in the behavior of a Christian. And whenever possible, it is far better to resolve things within the church.

3. A simple, yet painful, diagnostic question reveals whether our motive and context are right (6:7-8).

Paul then raises the crucial diagnostic question that reveals our motive and the context from which we are operating. He writes, "To have lawsuits at all with one another is 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!" (6:7-8). The answer we give, if we are honest, shows us the state of our hearts and minds. What do we really love? For whose kingdom are we really living?

So the question boils down to this: What price are you and I willing to pay for the glory of God, the honor of Christ and his church, and for the sake of the world? Being a Christian costs most of us so very little. It cost Christ his self-emptying, suffering, sin bearing, and death, in order to bring us life. Why should we expect following Christ to cost us nothing?

4. A clear reminder of who we were by nature compared to who we are by grace is necessary for a healthy resolution of the problem (6:9-11).

Paul concludes by reminding us of what we once were, of what we are apart from God's grace. After his list of the kinds of people who will not inherit God's kingdom, he then reminds us that by nature we belong in that list. "But," he writes, "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (6:11). So the obvious question is, how can we, who deserve God's condemnation, but whose debts have been paid by another, and who have been justified when we deserve to be condemned, how can we dare drag someone else into court rather than forgiving as we have been forgiven?

One thinks of Jesus' parable of the man whose master forgave him an unimaginably immense debt who turned right around and refused to forgive his fellow servant who owed him a fraction of what he himself had just been forgiven. When his master learned what he had done, the master summoned him, convicted him and cast him into prison until he should pay his debt in full. "So also," Jesus said, "my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:35).

Conclusion

The way we respond to grievances and offences against us shows whether or not we have begun to love as we have been loved, to forgive as we have been forgiven, and whether we really care for the glory of God, the honor of Christ's church, and the salvation of the world.