1 Corinthians 6:1–11

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

> *Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? And if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? How much more things that pertain to this life! If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church. I speak to your shame. Is it so that there is not a wise man among you? No, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren?*
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> *But brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers. Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? Why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded? Nay, ye do wrong and defraud, and that your brethren. Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you; but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.*

Three Spheres: House of God, Before the World, Own House

The first five chapters of 1 Corinthians have dealt with the various ways in which the flesh manifests itself amongst the people of God — and chiefly within the

house of God, and what was going on there. Here in chapter 6 they want to take things outside — not judgment within the assembly, but before the courts of the world.

One can read 1 Corinthians in such a way that in each chapter the flesh is dealt with in some particular manifestation. Chapters 1 through 5 are within the house of God. Chapter 6 is outside the house of God. And chapter 7 comes to our own house — the sphere of marriage. These three spheres — the assembly, the world, and the home — are where the flesh in a Christian can manifest itself. In 1 Corinthians, by inspiration of the Spirit of God, the flesh in its various activities is brought into judgment in all three.

Having failed to judge things within the house of God — as we saw in chapter 5 — it would not be surprising that they would then take their matters with each other outside, before the unjust and not before the saints. That is a striking use of the word: *the saints.* A saint is a holy one. The contrast is between the unjust and the holy ones. Of course, saints do not always act up to what they are — but that is what we are called.

The Saint Is Above the World

To take one's brother before the world is to say that the world is superior to one's brother. The answer to that is the apostle's own: *Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world?* The saint is above the world. When a saint reduces himself to go to the world to exact something from his brother, he places the world in a superior position to a fellow Christian — the very one who is going to participate in the judgment of that same world.

At a deeper level, this is a denial of the place we have been brought into as being in union with Christ, and in union with one another. It is also a denial of the headship of Christ over His church — to take such matters to the world rather than first to Him, and then to follow the order He has given us in Matthew 18.

And it implies that the Holy Spirit is not sufficient to look after the things of Christ. The verse of 2 Corinthians 6 comes to mind: *What concord hath Christ with Belial?* A mixing of the things of Christ with the things that oppose Him.

Now, it is not discussed here whether the cause is just or unjust. That is not the point. Two different things could be in view: on one side, a matter that is simply just and fair; on the other, one that is really extortion dressed up as a legal claim. Neither case changes the principle.

Saints Who Shall Judge Angels

Know ye not that we shall judge angels? Not a great deal is said explicitly in Scripture about this, but the reason for knowing it is the same as the reason for knowing that the saints shall judge the world: we are one with Christ. We share in what He comes into. We are heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, so we share what He has come into. The angels that would come under such judgment would be the fallen ones. And our association with Christ in that role is implicit in our union with Him.

We come, in the imagery of Revelation 19, in that train following the rider on the white horse — the armies of heaven. We are associated with Him, and we shall reign with Him. How much more, then, things pertaining to this life! The apostle draws the argument from the greater to the lesser: if the greater responsibilities are ours in association with Christ, how could we be unfit to settle the smaller matters between ourselves?

The Irony of Verse 4

Verse 4 is full of irony: *If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the assembly.* The apostle is minimising the matters they are taking to court — calling them the smallest

things pertaining to this life. And then he says, well, if you must have these things judged, set the least esteemed in the assembly to do it.

The sting of that is this: one would naturally be loath to bring such a matter before someone of little apparent standing, because it would seem to require real discernment and qualification — hence the appeal to a trained judge outside. But the apostle's point is the very opposite: these things ought not to be happening in the first place. He is using irony to make you feel how out of place the whole business is. He is not endorsing the idea; he is saying, if you persist in having these things, then at least let one of small account in the assembly settle them — which is to say, they are of small account.

Then he adds: *I speak to your shame.* That is what he is doing — pressing shame upon the flesh in this matter. *Is it so that there is not a wise man among you? No, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren?* You have to go outside to find a wise man — there is not one among you. That is a humbling word.

Why Not Rather Suffer Wrong?

What the apostle says in verse 7 goes very much against the grain: *Why do ye not rather take wrong? Why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?* That is a hard thing for the flesh. We do not want to suffer wrong. We do not want to be defrauded. And yet, if we are one with Christ, we know that that was His course when He was here. He who had every claim suffered Himself to be maltreated as none other ever did.

It would do us good to cultivate a spirit in these things of asking what honours Christ, or what is against Christ. There is an account of a man of God to whom someone reported that another person had said something about him. He gave no response to it at all. His remark was simple: 'He did not say anything against my Saviour.' If we learned to cultivate that spirit, many things that could develop into a mountain in our minds would quickly be left with the Lord to judge. Not that

we would never approach a brother about a wrong against Christ Himself — but things that are merely against ourselves, against our person, we could well let go. The example of King David and Shimei comes to mind: *Let him curse — perhaps the Lord has sent him.* That was one of the bright moments in David's life.

Defrauding One's Brother

Rather than suffering being defrauded, they were engaging in defrauding. The word is the same in verses 7 and 8. *Nay, ye do wrong and defraud — and that your brethren.* Fellow Christians defrauding one another — that must be an awful abomination unto the Lord. But that is the flesh in activity. As we read in chapter 3: *I could not speak unto you as spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ.* It does not mean that a babe in Christ has to be fleshly — that would be an erroneous conclusion. But one can be fleshly and still be a babe in Christ. They were both. They had not yet learned Christ.

And defrauding someone is plainly an unrighteous act — which connects directly to the next verse: *Know ye not that unrighteous persons shall not inherit the kingdom of God?* So the behaviour of the Christian here raises a question in the mind — just as chapter 5 raised the question with the phrase, *if any man that is called a brother.* Not if a brother does these things, but if any man called a brother. The behaviour raises the question of whether the profession is real.

Ten Evidences of Unrighteousness

The ten items in verses 9 and 10 are not an exhaustive catalogue — ten is a number of responsibility before God, like the ten commandments. These are evidences of unrighteousness. The list divides into two groups of five: the first five centre around various forms of sexual sin, and the next five cover theft, covetousness, drunkenness, reviling, and extortion — a different character of things altogether.

The apostle was not concerned that it would be thought politically incorrect to list abusers of themselves with men alongside the rest. The Word of God is consistent — in the Old Testament and the New. He took it up also in Romans 1. The idolatry practiced at Corinth was deeply tied to these sexual sins — that is its own story. But all of it is classed together as the character of the unrighteous who shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

Be not deceived — a reminder that the flesh is quite capable of deceiving its owner. As the apostle says in Galatians 6: *Be not deceived; God is not mocked. For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.* We might be deceived or mocked by such a person, but God is not mocked.

The kingdom of God in the epistles is generally looked at as a sphere of moral reality — as the apostle says in Romans, it is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. As the Lord said to Nicodemus, entry into the kingdom of God requires new birth. That is the sense in which the expression is used here, and in John's Gospel and the epistles as a rule.

And Such Were Some of You

Verse 11 is a very precious verse: *And such were some of you.* The gospel had come through apostolic ministry to this city — a city known for all these kinds of things, and more. The word *to Corinthianize* had become a proverb for the most gross sort of immorality. And yet the gospel reached into that, and such were some of them — past tense.

But ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified. There is a beautiful progression in these three. Washing brings before us the removal of uncleanness — one is made clean. Sanctification means being set apart to something new — no longer belonging to the old, but set apart to God. And justification is to be declared as one who has never sinned at all — going further than forgiveness.

Forgiveness implies the sin was there and has been forgiven; justification is that God declares the believer unchargeable. These are not three stages of a progressive experience in the same sense — justification, for instance, is purely positional. But together they set out the completeness of what God has done.

And all of it is *in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.* The power of that name, and the power of the Spirit sent down while the Lord is in glory, working on Christ's behalf and carrying out Christ's interests here below. It is a precious threefold accord — the name, the Spirit, and the work accomplished.

The Name: Lord Jesus

It is instructive that the text reads *Lord Jesus* and not the full title Lord Jesus Christ. Increasingly one hears Christians speaking simply of Jesus — Jesus this and Jesus that — without the title. That should exercise us. The Lord is entitled to be called Lord. He is Lord Jesus, Jesus the Lord, the Lord Jesus. Very few places in the epistles use His personal name alone. Usually it is qualified: Lord Jesus, Jesus Christ, Christ Jesus. And when it is simply Jesus, it often points to something connected with His life here on earth — His walk, His sufferings, His humanity as seen in the days of His flesh, as in *bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus.*

The habit of speaking of Him only by His personal name, without the title, reflects an occupation with His humanity without reckoning His deity — however much such persons might confess His deity in words. It is as though the deity were not felt to be there. We ought to learn from Scripture to give Him His title along with His personal name. He is the Lord Jesus. The Spirit of God chose the words He did for a reason — and they are worth following.

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