

Conflict and the Cross \* 1 Corinthians 6

February 5, 2017 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

One of my goals for this “Keeping up with the Corinthians” series was to give us the opportunity to talk about some very practical things. Some people claim that the Bible is too philosophical or removed from the real world to be useful, but that’s really not true. God inspired the writing of the Bible so that it would speak to issues that were relevant to our everyday lives and a lot of those issues are gathered up and concentrated here in 1 Corinthians – for example – what do we do when conflict occurs between two members of the church? Do we politely avoid it? Do we politely ask them to take it outside and let the courts settle it? What do we, as brothers and sister in Christ, do?

Now... I know that this could get very serious, very fast, so I want to try to set a light and optimistic tone right off the bat this morning. So I offer you... a poem. A limerick actually.

It happened at one Langford dinner;  
SOMEone– they thought – had a winner.  
(But) The recipe failed  
And our faces all paled  
And we all walked away five pounds thinner.

Right? It could happen. I remember in seminary before a class, the prof was taking prayer requests and one of the guys in the class asked that we pray for his church. The youth had run a fundraising dinner earlier that week and had been in charge of cooking the chicken and let’s just say they didn’t cook ALL of it thoroughly enough. Three quarters of the people at that fundraising dinner got food poisoning.

If I was one of the people that got sick, what would my response be? This is your fault! You’ll pay for that!

Or if someone started making accusations about someone else’s character; started passing around rumours about someone in the hopes of taking them down a notch or two – how would we handle it?

These are the sorts of things that the Christians in Corinth were dealing with; the problem is, they were handling conflict as Corinthians rather than as Christians.

What were Corinthians like? Well, let me describe Corinth itself and then we’ll understand what it meant to be Corinthian.

Corinth had a really unique place in the ancient world. See Corinth is located on an isthmus between two pieces of land and by establishing ports on either side, they could save merchants almost a week and a whole lot of danger from pirates and wind by crossing at Corinth. They would either empty their ships and cart it across the six kms or in some cases, even drag the whole boat across – there’s an ancient roadway there used to transport ships and goods across land and so Corinth quickly became a very important economic hub of the Ancient world. It was at the Crossroads of the Roman Empire. It was full of business opportunities.

And probably because of those business opportunities, there were a great many LEGAL opportunities. Greco-Roman culture was litigious to begin with and Corinth was well known as a hot spot for lawyers. A Greek historian (Dio Chrysostom) writing within fifty years of Paul’s letter complained about ‘lawyers

innumerable perverting justice' trying to drum up business in the courtyard during the Isthmian Games – remember that from the summer? The siblings of the Olympic games that happened in Corinth? Corinth was a very litigious place.

So Paul visited this very litigious place (he actually gets taken to court in Corinth in Acts 18) and shared with them the Good news about Jesus - forgiveness and reconciliation with God through Jesus' death and resurrection - and they gave their lives to it and they gathered together as the church in Corinth. And it was great; you had people from all social classes, all stripes, men and women, free people and slaves – you had it all. And they experienced God's grace together.

And then something went wrong.

And without thinking about it, they acted like they always had.

You ever had that happen? The power's been out for an hour, you've been doing things by candlelight and then absentmindedly wander into a room and hit the light switch. Oh right, no power. Force of habit.

That's exactly what the Corinthians did. They were Christians now, but when somebody did wrong by someone else, and they acted like Corinthians without stopping to consider how their shared identity as Christians might impact the situation.

The guy who got hurt hauled the first guy in front of Judge Judy and Paul says – whoa, whoa, whoa. "Your experience of God's grace means you have a different standard to operate on now." And so we get our passage for today – 1 Corinthians chapter 6. Paul writes to the church at Corinth with a challenge, a principle and a rationale, and they all work towards this big idea – the Cross puts conflict in proper perspective. The Cross puts conflict in proper perspective. So let's see that this morning through a challenge, a principle and a rationale.

Here's the challenge – chapter 6, verse 1:

If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints?

2 Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases?

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

Here's the challenge – work out your conflict in church, not court.

Paul issues this challenge with a series of five rhetorical questions –

Question 1 – dare you take a dispute before the ungodly, instead of working it out among the saints? I.e., Why would you not work out your conflict in church, but go to court?

Question 2 – presses in the logic a little more – do you not know that the saints will judge the world?

That refers to Jesus' promise we'll help Him govern at the end of the age -

And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? (1Co 6:2 NIV).

In essence, if we will judge the nations at the end of the age, are we not competent to work out our own issues now? And don't get Paul wrong; he doesn't want to take away from the issues that the Corinthians are dealing with by calling them trivial; it's just that ALL human litigation is trivial in light of the Final Judgement.

“ ‘Trivial cases’ does not mean the the Corinthian litigation did not involve serious offenses, merely that *all* human litigation is trivial when viewed in light of Judgment Day” (Blomberg, 117).

Mat 19:28 Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Question 3 (verse 3) Paul turns up the heat a little – not just ‘you’ll judge the nations’ but ‘don’t you know that we will judge angels?’ Paul’s probably alluding here to Daniel 7 where it talks about God’s people governing all of Creation, including the angels.

And the point of it is this – Corinthians, you are ridiculously qualified to handle conflict within the church. You going to the courts is like a referee going to a goalie to ask for a verdict on a disputed goal. Don’t go outside to the secular courts to handle your conflict.

In fact, I think Paul really prods them with question #4 –

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?

Right? You know when you left behind your old life to follow Jesus how self-interested, how sin influenced you were; and yet now you want to go back to that way of life, to their courts to achieve justice? The world thinks it wise to call the Cross foolish, but you know the Cross is God’s wisdom and power – and yet you want to ask for their wisdom in resolving a conflict? That doesn’t make sense. They are wrong about the Cross; what makes you think they’ll be right about your problem?

Now it is possible that Paul is saying something a little different in verse 4 – like the original NIV has it “Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church!” (1Co 6:4 NIV) – the idea being even the simplest of Christians will prove to be wiser than the wisest non-Christian judge. And that is a valid translation and admittedly the grammar here is a little obscure – it could equally be a command like in the old NIV translation or a question like in the new NIV – but I suspect that the newer way is right and Paul just keeps turning up the heat with more and more questions.

Because verse 5 is actually another question – rhetorical question #5 now –

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’s really laying into them isn’t he? He’s really prodding them to take up their responsibility to deal with conflict in house.

And verses 6 & 7 get at the result of their inaction –

But instead, one brother goes to law against another--and this in front of unbelievers!

7 The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. (1Co 6:6-7 NIV).

That's a striking statement – even if you go to court and win, you'll have lost, because you'll have shown the world that Christian love is only worth doing when it's in your interest and because you'll have made an enemy out of a brother. Right? When God saves us, He takes strangers and makes them brothers. When Christians take each other to court though, it takes brothers and makes them enemies. On top of that, even a win in court can be a loss because of the personal impacts it has.

Ken Sande of Peacemakers ministry writes “...Litigation often takes a much higher personal toll than most people anticipate. The financial, emotional and spiritual demands of the adversarial process can be enormous, and they can even outweigh gains made through a favourable judgment. That is why Abraham Lincoln gave this advice to a class of law students over a century ago: ‘discourage litigation. Persuade your neighbours to compromise whenever you can. Point out to them the nominal winner is often a real loser in fees, expenses and waste of time’ (Sande, 283).

Rather than getting entangled in legal pursuits then, Paul challenges the church to deal with conflict in house.

And the rest of verse 7 gives us a principle for application –

Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?

8 Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers (1Co 6:7-8 NIV).

Here's the principle – better to be wronged, than to pay it back.

Paul is actually quoting Greek philosophy to the Corinthians here because even Stoic philosophers recognized that in taking someone to court for doing wrong to you, you were risking doing wrong to them. “Prosecuting someone for personal injury is returning injury in kind, and that is shameful... the proper attitude for the truly wise in the face of adversity is benevolence” (Mitchell, 573)

And really, Paul is just seconding Jesus – Matthew 5:39-40 - If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. 40 And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. Paul puts it in his own language in his letters – like 1 Thessalonians 5:

15 Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

That's why Paul advances this principle – better to be wronged, than to pay it back. He acknowledges that the Corinthians are feeling hurt, deprived, unjustly treated even – but to pay it back will only add to the pile of wrongs. Here's why:

The courtroom is not a good place to make friends – you go there for the express purpose of achieving victory over the other person and in the words of David Garland, Christians suing each other represents

the ultimate triumph of self-interest over love (209). Right, Paul is going to say in chapter 13 'Christian love keeps no record of wrongs' and courts demand a highly detailed record of wrongs. Courts tend to prioritize retribution over reconciliation.

But Christian love puts it the other way – reconciliation, not retribution, so Why not rather be wronged? Paul says. Why not rather be cheated?

Now, let me pause here for a minute to acknowledge that those are pretty bold statements. 'Why not rather be wronged' can be hard to hear, especially in a culture where lawyers advertise on TV saying 'make sure your rights are protected.' And I acknowledge that I've never been in a courtroom in my life and for some of you, Paul's words are a lot sharper than for others. So I want you to know that I'm trying to choose my words carefully here.

And I also want you to know that Paul hasn't forgotten about justice. Right? That's why I've paraphrased Paul into the principle 'better to be wronged than to pay it back.'  
THIS IS NOT A CALL TO ABANDON JUSTICE, BUT TO SEEK JUSTICE IN THE CHURCH, NOT THE COURT.  
He's not saying 'better to be wronged and leave it at that' but 'when you are hurt, you have been wronged, but instead of risking wronging the other person in secular court, enlist the help of other Christians to make sure that justice is done.'

That's tucked into verse 5 – remember - is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers (1Co 6:5 NIV)? That's not JUST a rhetorical question. It's a call for them to get involved.

You know, the problem in Corinth is not just that Christians were doing wrong to each other and going to court in response; the problem was that Christians were hurting one another and the church was doing nothing to help them resolve their conflict. Paul is really going after the Corinthians because they've failed to deal with conflict in their midst and it got to the point where it went to secular courts.

Do you see? Paul assumes that if there was some conflict going on between believers in Corinth, the church should have helped them to resolve that problem before it got to the court.

Instead of thinking like a Corinthian, and heading straight for courts, they should have thought more like Jesus and headed straight to in Matthew 18.

15 "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.

16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'

17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

See, there should have been three really real opportunities there for Christians to work out their conflict in the church – individually, with a few others, with the whole church – and at any of those levels, somebody in Corinth should have stepped in and said 'let's just take the boiling pot off the burner here and work this out.'

But it's awkward right? So they didn't do it.

And it's very counter cultural – just as much for the Corinthians as it is for us. I'll tell you, I spent half the time writing this principle part going – but what about justice – this guy did wrong, why should I just absorb that pain and involve the church in dealing with it? Why not just take him to the courts and hang him out to dry?

What's the rationale Paul?

Well, here it is – when we wronged God, He didn't hang us out to dry. When we wronged God, He decided it really WAS better not to pay it back. Verse 9.

9 Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders  
10 nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

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. (1Co 6:9-11 NIV).

Here's the rationale –

We work out conflict in the church,  
we bear wrong rather than pay it back  
God paid back our wrongs with grace.

Do you see?

The Cross puts conflict in proper perspective.

We run into conflict with other Christians and we are immediately tempted to think like the world – what are my rights? How can I get justice? How can I pay them back for what they did to me? I want retribution, not reconciliation.

But God considered the conflict between us and Him and paid back our wrongs with grace.

Paul's calling us to look beyond our conflict with other humans to consider our conflict with God.

That's verse 9 -

Wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God. That's us. We might not be adulterers or thieves or swindlers but all of us have put our own interests before God's at one time or another. And so citizens who don't act in the interest of the King have no share in His Kingdom. That's justice. If God took me to court, He would have a huge pile of evidence against me, showing that I was not entirely devoted to Him. And so He could rightly judge against me.

And Paul applies that to the Corinthians – adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, swindlers – that was you!

And yet...

Verse 11 –

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.

God paid back our evil with grace.

We were a mess – and God washed us clean.  
We were stained by sin – and God made us holy.  
We were condemned by the Law – and God declared us not guilty – that’s what that justified word means.

And all because of what Jesus did on the Cross. There’s no – you turned your life around and then God said ‘boy, look at what a lovely devoted life Graham is life.’

I was washed.  
I was sanctified.  
I was justified  
IN Jesus’ name,  
BY the Spirit of our God.

See – the Cross puts conflict in proper perspective.

The Cross shows God handling conflict with both justice and grace and He calls us to handle conflict the very same way – with justice and grace.

He wants us as His children to be responsible and to work out conflict in our midst with the same justice and grace that He treated us with. And if you think about it, this is why Paul insists that the church deal with conflicts, not the secular courts.

We have been experienced God’s unique brand of compassionate justice for ourselves. We know what compassionate justice is like, so we can extend it to others. Secular courts are making good progress in this direction, but still, they have no idea what God’s radical forgiveness is like.

So how does this work in practice?

I’m not aware of any pending lawsuits in the congregation but that doesn’t mean it’s not relevant to us. We are called to apply these things in our everyday experiences of conflict. When your spouse or a co-worker or a fellow member of the church hurts you, resist the instinct to retaliate and instead spend some time thinking about how God handled your conflict with Him. Handle your conflict with another in light of the Cross.

And let’s take Paul seriously and here the call to handle conflict in the church. As fellow recipients of God’s grace, we can help each to deal with conflict in light of the Cross. In my prep this week, I found a text from Warren Burger, chief justice of the United States Supreme Court in 1982, recommending just that:

“One reason our courts have become overburdened is that Americans are increasingly turning to the courts for relief from a range of personal distresses and anxieties. Remedies for personal wrongs that

were once considered the responsibility of institutions others than the courts are now boldly asserted as 'legal entitlements.' The courts have been expected to fill the void created by the decline of church, family and neighbourhood unity" (Sande, 54). Warren Burger, 1982.

Let's help each other to deal with conflict in the church.

Does this mean that there are never ever circumstances where it's ok for a believer to sue another believer? And that's a good question that deserves serious consideration. Given Paul's principle – better to be wronged than to pay it back – I would say that it should be the very last resort.

And frankly, I think that this is a call for the church to take seriously the importance of working out conflict biblically, so that it doesn't come to that. Right? I hope that as Christian brothers and sisters, we would be able to treat each other with grace and work something out if I said something that devalued your character. (Lane) And if that didn't work, you'd approach me with a few other gracious people. And if I was really obstinate, you'd go to the board and say – please help brother Graham to act in light of the Cross.

Now of course what if the conflict is between you and a non-Christian? Paul really doesn't say anything about it but again, I think 1 Corinthians 6 asks us to see litigation as a last resort. Gordon Fee writes – 'we should always be prepared to ask WHY [we] would want to do so. If it is out of concern for the one who defrauded and for all other who might be so taken in, then one might seem fully justified. But if it is for the sake of one's own possessions alone, then one surely needs to ask about proper motives and priorities" (Fee, 238).

The Cross reminds us to handle conflict as God did.

To conclude this morning, I want to give the final word to the late Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia – he was a Christian man serving as a Supreme Court justice and I think that gives him a really unique insight into our passage – so I'll conclude by quoting him:

I think this passage (1 Cor. 6:1-8) has something to say about the proper Christian attitude toward civil litigation. Paul is [is saying] that the mediation of a mutual friend, such as the parish priest, should be sought before parties run off to the law courts ... I think we are too ready today to seek vindication or vengeance through adversary proceedings rather than peace through mediation... Good Christians, just as they are slow to anger, should be slow to sue" (Sande, 55).

## BENEDICTION

16 Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. (2Th 3:16 NIV).