

Church Live Re-Visited: Session Six - Part 1

by Ron Bailey

The sermon explores the issues of personal rights and legal disputes among Christians, emphasizing the need for unity and resolution within the church community.

Duration: 23:40

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 6:1

Topics: "Christian Living", "Conflict Resolution"

Description

This sermon delves into the issue of personal rights and the misuse of legal processes within the church community, highlighting the importance of not insisting on one's own rights but rather prioritizing Christ's way. It explores the perverted self-survival instinct that leads to conflicts and defrauding among believers, emphasizing the need to live by the principle of 'not I but Christ'. The speaker draws insights from Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians 6, addressing the underlying attitudes and behaviors that reveal a lack of divine perspective and a focus on self-preservation.

Transcript

OK, we'll pray. Father, we come to you again tonight as we've come each time in a week. We ask you, Lord, to be our teacher.

We ask you by your Spirit, Lord, to give us understanding. We ask you, Lord, to give us heart ready to obey what you say to us. We pray, Lord, that you will take this time and use it to speak your word into our hearts.

Amen. Amen. OK, thank you.

It's good to see you all again. It's, I think, a month since we were together last, so I guess you'll all have forgotten what we did last time. But there is a kind of a connection between what we did last time and what we're doing this time.

Last time we were dealing with issues of judgment in the church and the way that issues of sin in the church had to be dealt with. And there's a kind of a connection that runs on into what we're going to do tonight with that as well. We're going to do chapter 6 of 1 Corinthians.

And in some ways these first six chapters may be issues that have actually arisen from some correspondence that went in between Paul and Chloe. Do you remember right at the very beginning of this

letter Paul says that he has heard certain things from Chloe and that partly he believes them. And he's heard things about division, he's heard issues.

And it may be that the first half of this letter is Paul actually beginning to address some of the issues behind what he's heard Chloe said. And that would certainly fit with this passage here. Let me read, I'll read, I'm going to break it up into three parts.

And I'll read first of all chapter 6 verses 1 to 9. And I'm going to call this really the issue of personal rights. I'm going to talk about personal rights and then I'm going to talk about the kingdom of God. And then I'm going to talk about sexual rights and other rights that kind of go along with that.

You won't get embarrassed, I'm not going to go into any great details of anything. Okay, so this is chapter 6 and verse 1. Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust and not before the saints? Do you not know that the saints shall judge the world? And if the world shall be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Do you not know 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, do you set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church? I speak to your shame. Is it so that there's not a wise man among you? Know not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goes to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers.

Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you. Because you go to law one with another. Why do you not rather take wrong? Why do you not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded? Nay, but you do wrong and defraud, and that your brethren.

Do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Okay. So this is the issue that's sometimes referred to as the saints going to law with one another. And I suppose it asks the question, or we need to ask the question, what does the Bible have to say about us insisting upon our rights? Insisting upon our political rights, our local rights? What does the scripture have to say along that line? For example, there are at least three instances in the scripture where Paul claims his rights.

When he was in prison at Philippi, and they just wanted to release him quietly and just let him drift away, he insisted, because he was a Roman citizen, there was an official dismissal, and that people came and recognised that what they had done was wrong. When he was at Jerusalem, and he was arrested, and they were about to scourge him, as they say, they were about to beat him, one of the patterns for Roman justice was that they believed that a man would only give the truth under stress. So they always kind of flogged people when they wanted the truth.

So they stretched Paul out and were just about to give him a flogging, when Paul said, is it lawful to take a man who's uncondemned and who's a Roman and flog him? And that stopped that. And then, of course, there's the famous instance where, towards the end of the Acts of the Apostles, we discover that Paul is at Caesarea, and in the middle of a trial there, that just looks as though it's going to go on and on and on and never come to any real resolution, Paul appeals to Caesar, as to say, as a Roman citizen, his ultimate court of appeal was that he could ask to be tried before Caesar himself. So we've got three instances where Paul apparently claims his right and involves the legal process.

So why is Paul criticising these people here who seem to be involved in the legal process? I think there's a fairly simple answer to it. And it's just that Paul was willing to use the law defensively. He was willing to use it in his own defence.

And I suppose he was aware that what he was doing was, although it was in his own defence and he would benefit from it personally, he would not be the only person who would benefit from this. If certain precedents could be established, if it was established that you couldn't do this with Christians and you couldn't do that, it would automatically have given Christians greater liberty to do certain things. It's interesting, I'm fascinated by a group of people called the Primitive Methodists.

They came from North Staffordshire, they came from Stoke-on-Trent. And in the early part of the 19th century they were a very powerful move of God. And they were often in prison.

And they became really quite expert lawyers, knowing what all the questions were to ask and how to handle these things. And really what they were doing all along was not just trying to ensure their own personal comfort, but to ensure liberty for the Gospel. And they understood that if they didn't make a stand on some of these issues, it wasn't just themselves who would suffer, but others would suffer and ultimately the Gospel might be silenced.

These people, of course, aren't using the law defensively, that Paul is criticising here. They're actually using it offensively, that's to say they're using it aggressively. They're actually using the law against one another.

And there's certainly no indication that Paul would ever have used the law against another Christian. From time to time, if you travel, it's less the issue in this country, but not without incidents here as well. But sometimes in parts of the country you come across really grievous instances of Christians going to law with Christians.

And you find in some primitive place which maybe is predominantly Muslim and you've got three groups of Christians who've all gone to law about who owns the building and who has the right to do this, that and the other there. And it really is, it's a disgrace, of course. And it's just a terrible testimony.

Paul is almost, you can see his surprise here when he says, dare any of you. It's almost as though such a thought would never have entered his head if he hadn't actually heard of it. Do you actually have the audacity, the nerve to go to law with one another? This course of action and what they are doing here, to Paul, it isn't just that it's wrong in itself.

It's wrong because it shows something under the surface. It shows something about the attitude, the disposition, the way that these people are actually behaving. And he actually says, this is what he says, if I can just find the verse.

Yes, he says in verse 2, Do you not know that the saint shall judge the world? And if the world shall be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Some modern versions actually don't use the word smallest, they use the word trivial. I think that's a mistake because small and trivial are not the same thing. Things that are trivial really are of no importance.

Things that are small may be actually of quite significant importance for the person who is suffering them. There isn't a judgment of that nature. Things that touch us are big.

Things that don't touch us are not big. It really has to do with the way that we are reacting to what's happening in our own little kind of neck of the woods. We do need, all of us, we need a kind of a divine sense of proportion.

It is very, very easy to get things out of proportion because something is important to us. I'll say something about that in a minute. But I think Paul is touching on something else here.

And what he's saying is, if you have a matter against another person, the last time we were together, we were actually talking about what a Christian should do if he had a matter against somebody else. If there was some issue between two people, if there was some sin, some cause of offence, there's a very plain pattern as to how you're to actually begin to resolve that. What was happening here in the Corinthian setting is that they were actually going to law.

And that, as Paul says, before unbelievers. So what's gone wrong here again, and why is this not happening? Why are things not happening in the way that they should do? If you look in verse 4, you may have noticed that I kind of raised my voice at the end of verse 4. If you have judgments of things pertaining to this life, and then I put it like this, do you set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church? If you look at the King James Version, you'll see there's no kind of justification for the question mark. But in fact, there's no punctuation at all in the common Greek language that the Bible is written in.

So there are no full stops, there are no commas, there are no question marks, there are no explanation marks. And you really have to look at the context to see what it's doing. And I think that if this was an instruction from Paul, it actually would be in the form of a verb, which is called the imperative, where you give orders.

But it's not, it's just a simple kind of present indicative. And I think it's much more likely that Paul is asking a question here. And he's just simply saying, is this the way you behave? Knowing that actually Christians are going to judge the world and judge angels, how is it then that you're putting someone to make judgments who is of least esteem in the church? How are you doing that? That's really the question he's asking.

I think the modern versions in this particular instance are doing that better. He says this, he says in verse 5, I speak to your shame. Is it so that there's not a wise man among you? No, not one able to judge or to discern that is between his brethren.

A brother goes to law with brother and that before the unbelievers. Now therefore there is utterly a fault, he says. There's something wrong, it isn't just their behavior that's wrong, their behavior is actually revealing that something else is wrong.

There's a fault here, there's something which is, there's a defect. I think the American Standard Version uses the word defect. There's a defect among you, there's some, what's happening, this happens very often in behavior, that our behavior actually reveals some deeper roots, some underlying issue that's really operating in all this.

So he says there's a defect among you, and then I suppose we need to ask the question of what is the defect. We'll come to that in just a second. It has to do with, again, this fierce independence that we've looked at several times when we've looked at this church in Corinth.

Greek culture was fiercely independent, individuals were independent, churches were independent, and several times in the letter to Corinthians, we'll see these references where there are indications that the Corinthian church was behaving independently and ignoring the way that other Christians would be behaving in other places. And you get this same almost recklessness with the individuals. They're not

really considering one another.

They're actually just doing what's right in their own eyes, or they're doing what suits them best. And I suppose in this issue, you've almost certainly got that classic case where you get someone saying, well, it's actually the principle of the thing. There's an old Spanish proverb, apparently, which says it's stubborn people who make lawyers rich.

I quoted that once to Oscar, who, as you know, was a fully trained barrister. And he said, yeah, he said amongst lawyers, particularly litigation lawyers, he said their favourite word is principle. He said if they've got two people and they say, well, it's only two inches of my land where he's put his fence, and it doesn't really matter about the land, but it's the principle of the thing, the lawyers just rub their hands in anticipation.

Because they run and run and run. It's this stubbornness. It's really this, I will not be beaten.

I will not lose this situation. And I will come out winning in this context. And what we've got, you'll see this goes right the way through Corinthians.

Again and again, it comes back to this thing that we identified in the first chapter, where Paul says, this is what I've heard, that every one of you is saying I. I am of Paul, and I am of Apollos, and I am of Cephas, and I am of Christ. Every single one of you is just asserting his own independence and just kind of guarding his own little bit of territory. I really do think this is a very kind of real temptation in all kinds of areas, particularly I think maybe for people who take principles seriously.

It's a particular temptation for people who see that principles are important. I've quoted this to you before, but I'll quote it to you again. Or I'll quote it to myself again.

This is a quotation from Anthony Norris Groves, who was a missionary to Persia and other places, and it's quoted by G. H. Lange, and I just love the sentiment of this little phrase. He says this, What a blessing it is that the Lord's heart is so large that he can help wherever he sees some good thing, whereas man withdraws because he sees some evil thing, which is generally found to mean something that wounds his self-love in the little scheme he had set up as perfection. I'll read it again.

I think this is almost good enough to be scripture, this particular thing. And I'll read it because I know that this is one of my own peculiar temptations, this pedantry, this kind of goddess hold to the line, because if you compromise, you don't know what will happen next. What a blessing it is that the Lord's heart is so large that he can help wherever he sees some good thing, whereas man withdraws because he sees some evil thing, which is generally found to mean something that wounds his self-love in the little scheme he had set up as perfection.

And Paul goes on to say this. He says in verse 7, There's utterly a fault among you, because you go to law one with another. Why do you not rather take wrong? Why do you not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded? No, he says, you do wrong and defraud and that's your brethren.

I think this is another interesting and maybe kind of helpful thing to observe that very often when you attribute motives to someone, you're actually revealing your own heart more than you're exposing the person that you've just kind of seen do something. Because what you're really saying is, if I did that, the reason I would have done it is because of this, because this is the way I think. And what Paul is doing here, he's putting his finger on it, he's really saying the reason you do it is because you yourself are

defrauding.

You yourself are wanting to do certain things. Each one of you is maintaining his own right to his own things. There's this basic dishonesty, that you're actually setting up one standard for yourself and another standard for somebody else.

Okay, and really these are signs of a perverted self-survival instinct. We'll come on to a little aspect of this in a little while, but maybe I'll just touch on this now before we have a break. When God created the human race, he created Adam with certain instincts.

Now, as I was saying just on Sunday morning, the desires, the appetites, the hungers that God has given to the human race were all gifts of God. That's the way God chose to make us. But the way we respond to those appetites, those hungers, is an area in which we are responsible not to be dominated by these things, but to be sure that they serve us and that we have not become the slaves of them.

And one of the instincts that God gave to the human race really was the instinct for self-survival. This is the instinct that says I don't want to be beaten. I've forgotten, who was the Scottish runner, chariots of fireman? Okay, Eric Liddell.

In the film, if you've seen the film, he's asked a question and someone says to him, why is it that you run so quickly? And he says, I don't like to be beaten. And I've often thought that really that, I don't know who put those words into Eric Liddell's mouth or whether he actually said them, but I've often thought that this really is a perfect answer that God has put something into us as human beings that doesn't want to be beaten. We weren't designed to lie down and die when trouble has come.

We weren't designed to give way to other pressures that come against us. We weren't designed like that. We were designed to survive in a situation that although it was perfect to begin with, God knew was going to become almost immediately hostile.

He knew that there were temptations would come and man was given an instinct to fight, to survive. But what happens when sin came into the world and man's disposition was altered? What happened is that that instinct to survive and the wish not to want to be beaten actually becomes corrupted into something which says, I will win no matter what it costs anybody else. Now that is not the way God made the human race.

And what's happened there is you've got an instinct which has actually been perverted. It's my kind of theory that most sins are actually just perverted instincts. They're just things taken to extreme or things taken out of context or things used in a way that they were never intended to be used in.

And it is right that we should have a consciousness of who we are and where we stand and what we believe and that we should have principles. But if we begin to kind of stand for our principles and demolish somebody else or attack somebody else whether it's by argument or by law or by force or whatever it is, we are now misusing an instinct that God has given to us. So, unless Christians consciously choose to live as not I but Christ, that little phrase Paul used in Galatians 2.20, not I but Christ.

Unless Christians choose to live that way, not my own rights, not my own preferences, not my own way, but Christ's way, it is inevitable that this pattern of life will be reproduced because we've got an instinct in us which if it's not directed by the word of God and by the spirit of God, will almost inevitably go back into this particular channel where it's had such a long time running. Do you follow that? Okay. So, this is Paul's

point to these people there.

That what they're really doing, what's behind all this, is that they are insisting upon, again, this little phrase of Oswald Chambers, my right to myself. My rights, my privileges, my, well, it's my authority. I am authorized to do this and this and this and I will not yield.

I will not come second in this particular trial. And that really is what's undermined so much of what's happened already in the Corinthian church. Okay, I'm going to have a brief pause.

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