

1 Corinthians 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Paul raises the issue of the Corinthian Christians bringing legal cases against other Christians in the congregation. The previous chapter had highlighted the responsibility that the church had to cast judgment in the case of the man with his father's wife.

In that case, the church was called to gather together and declare judgment, condemning the man and delivering him over to Satan. This judgment anticipated the final judgment. At the end of the chapter, Paul declared, It is likely that the parties involved in these legal cases were wealthier and more powerful.

They were using the courts against weaker persons in all likelihood, as civil cases were matters for the rich and powerful, and the outcome of such cases would likely have been decided by the wealth of the parties involved.

Paul cross-examines those who are so eager to go to the law courts. Don't they know that the saints will one day judge the world? That they'll even judge angels? And yet, the Corinthians are suggesting by their actions that they're incompetent to adjudicate in everyday cases.

[3 : 42] Paul might have verses such as Daniel chapter 7, verses 21 to 22, and verse 27 of that chapter in mind when he talks about the judgment that the saints will exercise over the world and over angels.

As I looked, this horn made war with the saints and prevailed over them, until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time came when the saints possessed the kingdom.

And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High. His kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominion shall serve and obey him.

Matthew chapter 19, verse 28, gives a similar impression. Jesus said to them, Truly I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

And in Revelation chapter 20, verse 4, Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshipped the beast or its image, and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands.

[4 : 54] They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The Corinthians think that they have great wisdom. They think that they reign like kings. And yet, for all of this supposed super-spirituality, they act as if unbelievers are better equipped to judge than Christians.

The very fact of such legal conflict between church members is already a sign of catastrophic failure, even apart from the scandal of airing their personal disputes before unbelievers, and in the process tacitly admitting their inadequacy to execute judgment themselves.

Paul wants the Corinthians to feel ashamed that such a situation could arise, and he twists the knife of his criticism in verse 5. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, you who have been talking so much about your wisdom and your reigning like kings?

Is there truly no one among you who can deal with these cases? The Corinthians seem to have forgotten that they are the people of God. If anything, the Corinthians should prefer to allow themselves be wronged and defrauded than to go to the unrighteous pagans, those who are despised for their injustice, for judgment.

It is much better to be defrauded and wronged than to defraud and wronged. And then also a preoccupation with your rights over other concerns is a sign of the flesh. Paul's point is not that legal cases are always inappropriate.

[6 : 15] Rather, the behaviour of the Corinthians is revealing deep problems within their community. It's revealing the hollowness of their boast. And it's also showing that they are not a people who love and care for each other.

They are rather acting as people of the flesh, people who will bite and devour each other, people who are preoccupied with their own rights over the well-being of all. Paul wants the Corinthians to be aware that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Bringing predatory legal cases against others and having sexual relations with your father's wife are practices characteristic of this evil age. And those who practice or give themselves over to such things will end up being condemned with the evil age.

Back in verse 11 of the preceding chapter, Paul wrote, But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard or swindler, not even to eat with such a one.

He mentions these offences again in this chapter, but he adds to them adulterers and thieves, and two others, which the ESV combines as men who practice homosexuality. Many of these things are related to the offenders that must be cut off in the book of Deuteronomy and elsewhere.

[7 : 28] The greedy, the thieves and the swindlers might relate to the discussion of people going to court against others. That's what they're engaged in, and these are not the practices of those who will inherit the kingdom of God.

The words grouped together as men who practice homosexuality should probably be distinguished. Other translations use terms like passive homosexual partners practicing homosexuals, or effeminate nor sodomites, or male prostitutes sodomites.

They seem to form a pair, but there are differences between these two things. Some have seen it as the active and the passive partner in homosexual relations, but there is probably more going on. The second term appears here in the Greek record for the first time.

It is, however, a word that essentially refers to one who lies with a male, as we see the construction of the term. It presumably is based upon the Old Testament prohibition in Leviticus chapter 18 verse 22.

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination. The first word literally means soft ones, and is often translated effeminate, although the term isn't etymologically related to femininity, as it is in English.

[8 : 38] Although it can be conceptually related, as soft men would often adopt feminine affectations. Because of the association of effeminacy with male prostitution, or passive homosexual partners in antiquity, some have translated it those ways, drawing those more specific associations.

The association with homosexual practice does seem to be there. However, it should not be so narrowly defined. The concept here is not merely concerned with sexual behaviour, but also includes what many would term presentation.

In Deuteronomy chapter 22 verse 5, we're told, A woman shall not wear a man's garment, nor shall a man put on a woman's cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God.

The concept of softness here probably involves a cluster of related things. Sexual deviancy, men acting and dressing like women, a devotion to luxury, ease, and pleasure.

And these are the sinners in Paul's list that get the most attention, as they excite the most controversy in the current context. However, they are classed alongside sexually immoral persons more generally, alongside drunkards, and other sinners whose sins are more economic in character.

[9 : 47] Paul's point here, however, is to call the Corinthians to live out the transformation that has occurred in their lives. They used to be all of these things. They used to be defined by such behaviours, traits, and practices.

But something changed. 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. He presumably has their baptism in mind here, when they were washed and their setting apart was sealed to them.

Baptism is also a public declaration of our vindication by God, sealing our justification. Like the coronation ceremony performed upon someone who has acceded to the throne, baptism is a formal solemnisation of our new status in Christ.

We should be able to look back at our baptisms and recall all the realities that have been sealed to us in it. Adoption, justification, sanctification, forgiveness of sins. And then grasping hold of these promises and gifts by faith, live confidently in terms of them.

That seems to be what Paul intends here, by recalling the Corinthians to the fact of their baptism. He will now call them to live out its meaning faithfully. The Corinthians seem to have used slogans to describe their spirituality and Paul takes these up and responds to them.

[11:04] All things are lawful or permitted for me. They think that they reign like kings, they are the wise, they have freedom to act as they please. Paul responds to their slogans in verses 12 to 14.

So the Corinthian slogan, All things are lawful or permitted for me. Paul's response, But not all things are helpful. The Corinthian slogan, All things are lawful or permitted for me, but I will not be dominated by anything.

And then the Corinthian slogan, Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food and God will destroy both one and the other. And then Paul's response, The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord and the Lord for the body.

And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. You should see the symmetry between those statements. Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord and the Lord for the body.

And then, God will destroy both one and the other. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. The Corinthians believe that everything has permitted them, but not everything is helpful and edifying.

[12:14] They champion unfettered liberty, but such liberty can take liberties with us and end up binding us to its service. As they are elevated spiritual persons, they think it doesn't matter what they do with their bodies.

Yet the body is not marginalized by Christian spirituality. The body will not be finally destroyed, but it belongs to the Lord and it will be raised up just as Christ's body was raised.

The Corinthians seem to use this slogan about food to justify their sexual promiscuity and other forms of sexual immorality. If the body is just going to be destroyed, it doesn't really matter that much what you do or don't do with your body.

They could continue sleeping with prostitutes because the body ultimately does not matter. Our bodies, however, Paul argues, are in an intimate union with Christ. They are his members, his limbs and his organs.

He talks about this sort of thing in Romans in chapter 6, verse 13. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.

[13:21] In the context of that chapter, he's talking about baptism. In baptism, our bodies are presented to God. They're marked out as his and they're marked out for resurrection. In chapter 12, verse 1 of Romans, I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Spiritual worship involves the presentation of bodies. Our bodies belong to Christ and should not be joined to prostitutes. Paul quotes Genesis chapter 2, verse 24, about the man and the woman becoming one flesh.

Irrespective of the intent of the parties involved, a union occurs. Our bodies are united to Christ and they must be treated accordingly. We should not take something that is holy to Christ and unite it to the unholy prostitute.

We have been given the spirit of Christ and such union is incompatible with such unholy sexual unions. Paul makes the statement flee from sexual immorality and the Corinthians implicit response is, every sin a person commits is outside the body.

It doesn't really impact upon me. And then Paul responds by arguing that the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. He's defiling the church of God. He's dishonouring his body.

[14:39] He's taking what belongs to Christ and giving it to an unholy person. The church, as Paul has argued in chapter 3 verses 16 to 17, is God's temple. Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you?

