

The Imperfect Church
The Intolerant Church
1 Corinthians 6:1-11

Introduction

The phrase “out of left field” is one we use today to refer to something that we didn’t necessarily expect to happen. The phrase finds its origins in baseball, as a runner was making his way towards home plate and gets thrown out at home by the left-fielder. Since the runner would be facing home, his back would be to left field, meaning he wouldn’t be able to see the ball coming towards him from behind. So if the ball was thrown “out of left field” it came as a surprise to the runner, something he could not have seen coming.

“Out of left field” is definitely a phrase we could use to describe the text we are looking at today in 1 Corinthians 6. So far, Paul has been making clear, logical, linear arguments. We come to expect this from such an intellectual like him. His arguments are clear, concise, and compelling. They build on each other coming to these powerful crescendo moments. He’s been discussing division, wisdom, the Gospel, his authority...all leading up to confronting several specific issues of sin in the Corinthian Church.

After confronting the church over a significant sexual sin in chapter 5, and before he continues addressing further issues of sexual sin in chapters 6-7, he inserts these out-of-place verses about lawsuits among Christians. Didn’t really see that one coming. Doesn’t seem to fit, in fact it seems to interrupt. Yet since we are slowly making our way through the letter, and if we dig into what is going on behind the scenes, it all makes perfect sense. Paul is simply continuing to address the primary issue of the letter: The Church refuses to sever ties with its pagan culture. The Church isn’t being The Church. The Church once again is acting like the world.

1 Corinthians 6:1-11 - *When one of you has a dispute with another believer, how dare you file a lawsuit and ask a secular court to decide the matter instead of taking it to other believers! ² Don’t you realize that someday we believers will judge the world? And since you are going to judge the world, can’t you decide even these little things among yourselves?³ Don’t you realize that we will judge angels? So you should surely be able to resolve ordinary disputes in this life. ⁴ If you have legal disputes about such matters, why go to outside judges who are not respected by the church? ⁵ I am saying this to shame you. Isn’t there anyone in all the church who is wise*

enough to decide these issues? ⁶ But instead, one believer sues another—right in front of unbelievers!

⁷ Even to have such lawsuits with one another is a defeat for you. Why not just accept the injustice and leave it at that? Why not let yourselves be cheated? ⁸ Instead, you yourselves are the ones who do wrong and cheat even your fellow believers.

⁹ Don't you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people—none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God.¹¹ Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

TS – Four elements that Paul highlights:

1. SHOCKING PROBLEM

To our surprise, maybe even to their surprise, it is this issue that seems to rile Paul up the most. The first six verses that expose this shocking problem are the harshest ones in the entire letter. He frames the text with a series of in-your-face rhetorical questions, verse one and verse six bracket the paragraph with statements of horror at what is happening, and verse five is his most biting sarcasm. What is it about this issue in particular that lights such a blazing fire with Paul?

v. 1 - *When one of you has a dispute with another believer, how dare you file a lawsuit and ask a secular court to decide the matter instead of taking it to other believers!* The very first word in the original Greek is "Dare!" He is appalled at this. Christians are taking other Christians to court to settle their issues. In our world it may not seem like such a huge deal since we are so used to culture that delights in suing one another. Turns out, so did the Corinthians. The Greek culture was such that this was quite the common practice. The language here is clear that this is not referring to criminal court (those issues are always to be settled there). This is referring to civil court.

Two people who have some sort of issue between them (likely a property/money issue because of words he uses in v. 7-8), settle it in court. This was normal. This happened all the time. You get wronged, someone cheats you out of some money...the solution is simple, take them to court.

Once these people became Christians, this practice did not stop. Apparently it had not occurred to them that their faith in Christ might inform how they deal with issues and disagreements. Perhaps Jesus has a better way for believers to behave with one another. His primary problem with this is that these Christians are appealing to a secular court to administer justice, instead of taking the issue to other believers to settle it.

Now, right before this at the end of chapter 5, Paul has just concluded his judgment against this man who was sinning so grievously. In so doing, he gave us a great truth about how the Church is to function.

1 Corinthians 5:12-13 – ¹² It isn't my responsibility to judge outsiders, but it certainly is your responsibility to judge those inside the church who are sinning. ¹³ God will judge those on the outside; but as the Scriptures say, "You must remove the evil person from among you."

The Church governs itself. It judges those inside, makes those calls for itself, and administers justice. But what the Church does not do is make judgements against the outside world. That's God's job to judge. The inside judges the inside. The inside doesn't judge the outside. Here is what the Corinthians were doing...though the inside doesn't judge the outside, they were inviting the outside to judge the inside! He then goes on in chapter 6 to explain why this is such a problem:

v. 2-3 - ² Don't you realize that someday we believers will judge the world? And since you are going to judge the world, can't you decide even these little things among yourselves?³ Don't you realize that we will judge angels? So you should surely be able to resolve ordinary disputes in this life. He appeals to two truths here: 1) Christians are going to judge the world/angels at the Final Judgement. What does that mean? Well, he does not mean that you and I are going to sit next to Jesus at the final judgment and help decide who goes to Heaven or Hell. All he means is that since we are united with Christ, we stand with the One who is Judge over all things. So if we are on the side of the Judge, not the judged, in eternity, can't we make some simple decisions now about less important things?

Which leads to the second truth he appeals to: 2) these issues they are running to court to settle are relatively minor issues. V. 2 says "these little things" which is a superlative meaning that these issues could not be smaller than they are. They are insignificant. V. 3 calls them "ordinary disputes," a phrase that means issues of everyday life. So their appearances in court are not over these life-changing, traumatic issues. They are minor inconveniences that come up in normal life...yet they are blowing them out of proportion in an effort to get some money out of it.

Notice v. 4 - ⁴ *If you have legal disputes about such matters, why go to outside judges who are not respected by the church?* This phrase “not respected” means “have no standing.” Meaning that Paul’s primary concern here is not that the court system was pagan and corrupt, though research proves it absolutely was. His primary concern is that it is not the Church. Add to that the fact that every time Paul uses the term “believers” in these verses, it is the Greek word *adelphos*...brothers. These issues are family issues, not to be taken outside the family. These are brothers and sisters in Christ who love you, whom you love, and are to be trusted to help you.

Verse 5 is the most biting statement he makes, dripping with harsh sarcasm, and verse 6 caps off his concern with yet another horrified reaction. V. 5-6 - ⁵ *I am saying this to shame you. Isn’t there anyone in all the church who is wise enough to decide these issues?* ⁶ *But instead, one believer sues another—right in front of unbelievers!* Back in 4:14 he told them that he wasn’t saying those particular things to shame them. But this, this is absolutely to shame them. They ought to be ashamed, embarrassed that they would do such a thing. Isn’t there anyone who is wise enough to handle this? That’s a slap in the face. This church has been so enthralled by human wisdom, and now Paul sticks it to them...” if you’re so wise, why can’t you find someone to deal with this!”

And what is it that makes it so terrible? This is all done “right in front of unbelievers.” With this he carries over two ideas from chapter 5: 1) he addresses the Church about this sin, not the sinners themselves; 2) since the Church represents Jesus to the world, these kinds of worldly actions harm the witness of the Church. This doesn’t mean that we ought to be hiding our issues, only that we must deal with them in the proper context...in the Church. We don’t air our dirty laundry in front of a skeptical, unbelieving world. We protect the Church by loving it like this.

2. HUMBLING SOLUTION

What is the solution to a problem like this? His answer is a bit surprising. V. 7-8 - ⁷ *Even to have such lawsuits with one another is a defeat for you. Why not just accept the injustice and leave it at that? Why not let yourselves be cheated?* ⁸ *Instead, you yourselves are the ones who do wrong and cheat even your fellow believers.* To even get to this point is a loss. There is nothing to be gained by this. Instead, it is better (this is the humbling part) to be wronged than to wrong. It is better to be cheated than to cheat. In light of our contemporary mindset that says to assert yourself, fight for your rights, protect your ego, show them who’s boss, this isn’t a popular solution. Yet it is profoundly biblical.

Matthew 5:38-41 – ³⁸ “You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹ But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. ⁴¹ If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles.

William Barclay – “If Christians have even the remotest tinge of the love of Christ within their hearts, they will prefer to suffer insult and loss and injury rather than try to inflict them on someone else—still more so, if that person is a fellow Christian. To take vengeance is always an un-Christian thing. Christians do not arrange their dealings with others by the desire for recompense and the principles of crude justice. They arrange them according to the spirit of love, and the spirit of love will insist that they live at peace with one another, and will forbid them to demean themselves by going to law.”¹

As unjust as that sounds, we trust justice to come from the Lord’s hands, not our own. This doesn’t mean we allow ourselves to become doormats, only that we see there are more important issues in life than our ego or our rights. We submit our ego to the Lord, we forfeit our rights and give up demanding our way. We acknowledge that these issues are minor in light of eternity, that brothers and sisters in Christ matter more than our settling the score, and that following Jesus is a lifestyle of sacrifice. And that sounds very much like the Jesus we claim to follow.

1 Peter 2:19-25 - ¹⁹ For God is pleased when, conscious of his will, you patiently endure unjust treatment. ²⁰ Of course, you get no credit for being patient if you are beaten for doing wrong. But if you suffer for doing good and endure it patiently, God is pleased with you.

²¹ For God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps.

²² He never sinned,
nor ever deceived anyone.

²³ He did not retaliate when he was insulted,
nor threaten revenge when he suffered.

He left his case in the hands of God,
who always judges fairly.

²⁴ He personally carried our sins
in his body on the cross
so that we can be dead to sin

¹ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, 3rd ed., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 60.

and live for what is right.
 By his wounds
 you are healed.
²⁵ Once you were like sheep
 who wandered away.
 But now you have turned to your Shepherd,
 the Guardian of your souls.

William Baker concludes, "Since the Corinthian lawsuits involved minor matters, Paul issued an even greater spiritual challenge to them (6:7). Why not just drop the grievances altogether? Surely as those who have been recipients of God's grace, they should be prepared to suffer injustice as Christ did, a major New Testament theme (especially in 1 Pet 2-3). Even if they were to win their personal lawsuits, spiritually they had already lost. They had disgraced the name of Christ before pagans, they had sullied the reputation of a brother in Christ, and they had lost an opportunity to deepen their own spiritual lives."²

3. GRAVE WARNING

Though this text has already been quite harsh, he doesn't let up at all. Now, Paul zooms out to a much larger context and gives a deeply theological warning. v. 8-10 - ⁸ Instead, you yourselves are the ones who do wrong and cheat even your fellow believers. ⁹ Don't you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people—none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God.

So instead of letting themselves be wronged or cheated, to seek out revenge or to take this issue to the courts to settle the score, they end up being the ones doing the wrong and doing the cheating. It is a turnaround that has terrible consequences. Those who live like this, those who are seeking after their own person glory and gain, those who have not submitted to the lordship of Christ...they aren't in God's Kingdom.

He repeats the list of sins from 5:11 and adds a couple revolving around heterosexual and homosexual sin (which we will deal with when we pick 1 Corinthians back up after Easter). As he stated in chapter 5, people who embrace lifestyles like this reveal that they are

² William Baker, "[1 Corinthians](#)," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians*, vol. 15 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 89.

not part of God's people and are not to be treated as though they are. This is not to say that if you commit one of these sins then you obviously are not a Christian and should be put out of the Church. This is those who have surrendered themselves to this lifestyle. Those who are not struggling with sin, but have embraced it.

With this he is reminding us, warning us again, that in any church there are wolves that parade as sheep. There are goats that put on sheep's clothes. To use an image from one of Jesus' parables, there are weeds that grow up among the good crop. Just because someone attends a church and says Christian things does not mean they are following Christ. Jesus said in Matthew 7:15-20 - ¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep but are really vicious wolves. ¹⁶ You can identify them by their fruit, that is, by the way they act. Can you pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. ¹⁹ So every tree that does not produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions.

Paul will tell the Corinthian Church in 2 Corinthians 13:5a - ⁵ **Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves.** Why would he tell them that? Because this issue is real. The Church (those who are called by God to be his own people) are so transformed by the work of the Spirit in their life that they show themselves to be the Church. So if some in the Church are not living like the Church, what does that say about them?

4. ENCOURAGING TRUTH

Thankfully as Paul ends this difficult text, after being right up in their face, he ends on an incredibly beautiful truth. V. 11 - ¹¹ **Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.**

"Some of you" not ALL of you. "Some of you were once like that." That's your old life. God called you out of that. He's done a great work in your life, haven't you had enough of the old ways? Aren't you tired of walking the road that leads to death? Sever ties with your old life. Walk away from that life-taking road, and walk the life-giving one.

You were cleansed, made holy, made right by God. "You were cleansed" likely a reference to their baptism. The only other time Paul uses this same word is in Acts 22 when he recounts his own conversion.

Acts 22:16 - **16 What are you waiting for? Get up and be baptized. Have your sins washed away by calling on the name of the Lord.'**

You were cleansed, your sins were washed away. You were made holy. Set apart, dedicated to the Lord. You were made right by God. This is the word for "justification." It's a legal term...declared innocent in God's eyes. Your sin had pronounced eternal guilt and condemnation on you. You were at odds with God, in rebellion against him. But by the work of Jesus on the cross, and by your calling on him to save you, God declared you right in his sight. Innocent of your sin, forgiven and set free.

Since all of that is true about you...why would you ever live as if it wasn't? If God has done all this for you, why would you live as if he hadn't? Richard Hays writes that "those who are baptized into the community of faith have been transferred out of one mode of existence into another. The believer is to leave behind the behaviors characteristic of that old mode just as the butterfly leaves behind the cocoon and the habits of caterpillar life. Now—washed, sanctified, justified—baptized Christians are set into a new reality, not by some act of will or commitment but by the gracious action of a loving God."³

Conclusion

This text isn't out of left field at all. It fits with the same arguments he's been making since the start of the letter. The Church isn't supposed to look like and act like the world around it. The Church is the "called out ones," called out by God, out of the world around us, to be a new people. A new people who live in new ways. A changed people who live in changed ways. All because God, in his mercy, has cleansed, made holy, and made us right with himself.

If you don't know the reality of that today, then call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, who promises to save. Believe that Jesus is the Son of God who died for your sins and rose from the dead. Repent of your sins and turn to Jesus. Confess Jesus as Lord. Be united with Jesus as you are immersed in the waters of baptism and cleansed from your sin.

COMMUNION

³ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 100.