

**WHEN WINNING IS LOSING**  
**1 Corinthians 6:1-8**

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Let me say at the outset that Paul is not taking a position against lawyers, courts, or judges. Paul is specifically talking to the church. This is, perhaps, one of the most misunderstood passages in all of the New Testament. It's a passage about Christians and lawsuits between them. What is Paul really saying and to whom is he speaking? Answers to both those questions when we get to the sermon.

“Man Sues Himself”– that is the headline of an AP wire story. Let me summarize the situation for you. A guy drives a dump truck for the city. He accidentally backed the city's dump truck into his own car. He has the audacity to sue the city for damages. The city responds by pointing out that he's essentially suing himself because he is at fault. I know it sounds silly, but at the core is a very interesting question. At the core, an employer is often liable for the actions of the employees in the general course of their employment. With that argument, I guess the city should pay the man – though he backed into his own car?

Let's take it a step further. What if a policeman accidentally shoots his spouse while trying to apprehend a criminal? Would he then sue the city to pay him because he accidentally shot his wife? ([www.triskele.com/2006/03/16/man-sues-himself](http://www.triskele.com/2006/03/16/man-sues-himself))

I'm not sure what's right in these situations. We have much better legal minds than mine in the room. The point of these stories is this: Sometimes in going after others we lose sight of our own responsibility. Sometimes when we assert our individual rights in the church, we hurt the whole body and, thus, do harm to ourselves.

So what about Christians suing Christians? Dare we really hear what Paul has to say?

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It can hardly be denied that we live in one of the most litigious cultures ever to exist.

We've all heard the silliness about the mega dollar suits against companies like McDonald's for causing their customers to gain weight. **A federal appeals court revived part of a lawsuit against McDonald's in which two youngsters blamed their obesity on Big Macs and Chicken McNuggets. (USA Today, 1/26/05)** If they win, someone needs to file a suit against Blue Bell Ice Cream!

But have you heard this one – I hadn't – the story about the guy who sued himself. No kidding! **Robert Brock is an inmate at the Indian Creek Correctional Center in Chesapeake, Virginia. He sued himself for getting drunk and violating his own civil rights. He is currently serving**

**23 years for breaking and entering and grand larceny. In his handwritten suit, he says, “I partook of alcoholic beverages in 1993, and as a result I caused myself to violate my religious beliefs. This was done by my going out and getting arrested, which caused me to be in prison. For violating my religious beliefs, I want to pay myself \$5 million, but I ask the state to pay it since I can’t work and am a ward of the state.” The guy sued himself for \$5 million. And he wants the state, he wants us, to write the check. It didn’t take long for Judge Rebecca Smith to dismiss the suit. Her judgment read, “The plaintiff has presented an innovative approach to civil rights litigation. However, his claim and especially the relief sought are totally ludicrous.” (*Houston Chronicle*, 7/2/95, p. 4G)**

You know things have gotten bad when a man sues himself.

I want to be very clear that the passage in 1 Corinthians is not about lawsuits in general. It’s not about lawsuits between corporations. It’s not even about lawsuits between Christians and entities of the world. 1 Corinthians 6 is about the people of God suing the people of God – Christians suing Christian brothers.

I saw a religious cartoon where the soloist is about to sing a song on the platform as the piano player waits to play an introduction. With microphone in hand, the soloist says, “I’d like to share my song with you that the Lord gave me a year ago. And even though He did give it to me, any reproduction of this song in any form without my written consent will constitute an infringement of the copyright law which grants me the right to sue your pants off. Praise God!”

We don’t know what the lawsuits were about, but the fact that Paul doesn’t tell us makes the suits all the more trivial between Christian brothers. We’re told they are matters of civil law – they deal with everyday matters. Look at the end of verse 3, “...matters of this life,” and verse 4, “...matters of this life.” They probably concern economic issues, because the wronged party is said to be “defrauded” (verse 7).

Look at verse 1 again. Eugene Peterson paraphrases it this way in *The Message*: “And how dare you take each other to court. When you think you have been wronged, does it make any sense to go before a court that knows nothing of God’s ways instead of a family of Christians?”

I want us to notice three things in this passage dealing Christian litigation, brothers suing brothers.

### **I. This passage is about being called to be a community.**

The problem was that church members were suing church members in civil courtrooms, courtrooms outside of the church. They were taking their family’s dirty laundry, the church’s dirty laundry, and putting it before pagan or unbelieving judges and jurors. They lost their identity as the people of God when they did that.

As Christians, we are called to be part of a community. We are called to be part of the church.

**Michael Green, a scholar, said that in the early church that the grace of God was made credible by a society of love and mutual care which astonished the pagans and was recognized**

**as something entirely new. (Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*)** It wasn't that way in Corinth. But in some locations people believed in the grace of God because of the way the people within the church treated each other.

There was this new kind of people. Nothing like it had ever been seen before – a new kind of love, a new kind of giving. There was something entirely new about the way the people the church treated each other. In fact, their kindness to one another lent persuasiveness to the claim of the Christians that the age of the Messiah had dawned.

Do people look at the way we treat each other at First Baptist Church and say, "I've never seen anything like that in my life. Wow! There must really be something different about those people who meet at 12th and Tyler." The world should be convinced of Christ because of the overflow of love and care they see coming from the people called First Baptist.

We are an eschatological community. "Don't you realize," Paul said, "that one day those who are a part of the people of God will have participation in the judgment of the world. In fact, we will judge angels," Paul says. It's an unprecedented statement, but it falls well within the idea that as the people of God, that as adopted children of God, our glorious destiny makes nonsense out of the present reality that the people in the congregation are taking their cases before pagan judges.

In verse 4, "those who have no standing" is a very mild translation of the idea of being despised. You place men who are despised as judges over decisions between the people of God. "Isn't there any *sophos* among you, is there any wise one? Can't somebody sit down and listen to a dispute between brothers in Christ and come up with a compromising plan so that we don't hang out our dirty laundry before the world?"

Remember, there were some in Corinth who were claiming to be so wise, even so much wiser than Paul, and he seems to be saying tongue-in-cheek, "If you're so wise, why can't you settle your differences among yourselves rather than going to outside authorities?"

**The business was just getting going when one of the customer noticed a strange thing. He had begun bringing his car to this particular garage a few months ago, and had believed that it was doing a good job. People in the community seemed to respect the company, and it appeared to be flourishing. The boss seemed to be in charge; the employees were helpful and efficient.**

**But then one day this particular customer was in a different part of the town, and he spotted something odd. There, in quite a different garage, was one of the mechanics from the first one. He had brought his own car, not to the garage where he worked, but to a different outfit. And the person he was taking it to wasn't a qualified mechanic at all. In fact, he'd had no training with cars. The customer was anxious. If this mechanic didn't trust his own colleagues to look after his car, why should he do so? What's more, if this man was letting an unqualified operator do the job, it looked as though he didn't know, or didn't care about, the kind of skill required.**

**Paul really does regard the Christian community – even the small and muddled community in Corinth – as the community of God’s people. (Tom Wright, *1 Corinthians*, p. 63-64)**

This type of litigation puts brother against brother. Look at verse 6. “Brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers.” The Corinthians were shamefully taking church family disputes into the streets, and, therefore, bringing the whole church, the whole family, into disrepute.

This has to stop.

The problem with the lawsuits in Corinth or the lawsuits today between Christian brothers is this: Such conduct is part of a society which promotes individual greed rather than the new corporate identity in Christ. Once you believe in Christ, you should think of yourself more as a part of a body than you think of yourself as an individual. Thus, you would always do what is best for the church, what is best for the body of Christ, rather than what is best for your pocketbook.

It’s so hard to hear this call to community in our own culture which calls us to individualism. We live in a world that tells us that we’re self-sufficient and that we’re strangers to everyone else. But Paul says Christ has called us to be a family, to be brothers and sisters together.

How can anyone sleep in on Sunday morning when community is going on down here? How could you miss being part of the people of God?

**No Christian and, indeed, no historian could accept the epigram which defines religion as “what a man does with his solitude.” It was one of the Wesleys who said that the New Testament knows nothing of solitary religion. We are forbidden to neglect the assembling of ourselves together. Christianity is already institutional in the earliest of its documents. The Church is the Bride of Christ. We are members of one another. (C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*)**

Throughout the book of Acts and in the letters written by Paul, the church is always presented as a vital community. And it is our love for each other, our life as a community, that draws other people in to right relationship with God.

Our life of the called community is more than just about being together. Any group can be together. Any civic group can be together – and you’re part of other civic groups. But there is something unique about the communal life of this colony, of this people – the people called church. We are called to live the story of Jesus.

We, unlike any other institution, are called to discipline our wants and needs, to live our lives in congruence with the story of Jesus. It’s a story of service. It’s a story of sacrifice. It’s a story of God’s historic atonement for our sins. And as we live out the story of Jesus in our lives, community happens. If we are faithful to Jesus individually, we become faithful to His bride, His church.

More important than any private property is the unity of the church, Paul is saying. He calls them to convert their mindset, to see themselves no longer as participants in the economic structure of their city, but to see themselves as a member of the people of God.

## **II. The second thing we see in this passage is a condemnation of injustice.**

We are called to community, but there is also a condemnation of injustice. It's quite clear that in the courts in Corinth, it was the well-to-do church members suing the not-so-well-to-do. It was the "haves" against the "have-nots."

It won't be hard for us to believe that there was a strong bias in favor of the higher status litigant. The overwhelming majority of the civil cases in antiquity were brought by the wealthy and powerful against people of lesser status and means. The haves were taking from the have-nots. The judges themselves were members of the privileged classes and would ordinarily give preference to the testimony of their social peers against the testimony of those of lower rank. Those of high standing had the funds to hire professional lawyers to argue their cases and, if necessary, to bribe the judges. **One writer of antiquity complains, "Of what avail are laws to be where money rules alone, and the poor suitor can never succeed?...So a lawsuit is nothing more than a public auction, and the knightly juror who sits listening to the case approves, with the record of his vote, something bought" (Satyricon, 14). Dio Chrysostom notes that Corinth, especially around the time of the Isthmian Games, was full of "lawyers innumerable perverting judgment" (Or. 8.9).**

The rich members of the church were suing the poor members of the church. This really fits in with something we see emerge elsewhere in 1 Corinthians, and that is that there is tension between the upper and lower classes of the church at the table.

Their law favored creditors over debtors and landlords over tenants. Remember what it says in James 2:6: "For you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court?"

If a church operates like the world, then it is no different than the world. If the church's committees of power are filled with only people of influence, only people of wealth, and only people of prestige, then we have not conducted ourselves any differently than all the institutions around us, including society at large.

We are to be different here. We must not permit any injustice against those who have-not or who have less. In order to be a brother in Christ, it's to put all on equal ground. There are no lesser members of this society. There are no lesser members among the people of God.

## **III. Sometimes it's better just to be defrauded.**

Notice what Paul says. "Would you not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?"

"You've already lost," he says in verse 7. "There are no real winners when Christians sue Christians. You've lost even if you win. The whole church loses. The church's reputation is

soiled because you're out in the world, fighting it out in the law courts. You become, by that very act, a participant of wrong doing. You may be suing someone for doing wrong, but in suing them you are part of wrong doing," Paul says. "You, yourselves, defraud and brothers at that."

He seems to echo a strong teaching of Socrates as reported by Plato: "If it were necessary either to do wrong or to suffer it, I should choose to suffer rather than do it." Sometimes it's just best to be wronged.

Don't drag the name of Christ through the mud of the courts of unbelievers by suing brother against brother. Sometimes it's better to be defrauded.

"You don't know what he did to me. You don't know who I'm dealing with, Pastor."

I imagine the story of the lady who brought a monkey home from the pet store. She'd always wanted a monkey, and the pet store happened to have one that day. Well, she got home and her husband furiously objected.

"Where's he going to eat?" the husband asked.

"At our table," replied his wife.

He grunted in displeasure. "Well, you just tell me right now where he is going to sleep?"

"In our bed," said his wife.

"What about the odor?" the husband demanded.

"Well, I got used to you, and I guess the monkey can too," replied his wife.

Well, there is a little monkey in all of us here. There is certainly a little something that doesn't smell right about each of us. But we've all got to come to the same table. We've all got to sleep in the same bed. Because we're family. And we're all called into the community.

In preparing for this sermon, I came across the governing documents of numerous churches which incorporate this principle of community above society. For example, Christ Fellowship of Kansas City requires its members to sign an agreement which reads, in part, "I will submit to the church's discipline upon myself and lovingly assume my responsibility to participate in the discipline of other members, as taught in Scripture. If I am offended in connection with a disciplinary matter, I will seek resolution within the church. I will never initiate or pursue civil legal action against the church or any other Christian." ([www.christfellowshipkc.org/join\\_member\\_agreement.asp](http://www.christfellowshipkc.org/join_member_agreement.asp))

The legalities are complicated. And I'm not suggesting that anyone sign anything that would hinder his due process. But this much is clear: each of us needs to think about the body of Christ more than we think about our own rights. And sometimes when you win, you lose because when you hurt the body, all are injured. Remember who you are, Paul is saying. If Jesus really is the

Messiah, and you really are the people of the Messiah, why on earth would a civil court have jurisdiction between you.

Not “me,” but “us.”

Not “I,” but “we.”

= Community