

## PREFACE

It occurs to me that we are presently studying a passage from God's word, similar to others, that could be used by the secular world to paint Christians as some sort of separatist freaks. There are, of course, sects that *are*—that lift out certain passages and use them as the basis for a separatist lifestyle. They use, for example, the familiar passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians about their not being "unequally yoked together with unbelievers" in which he paraphrases from Revelation 18 and Isaiah 52.

**Read 2 Corinthians 6:14-18.**

But our current passage—the first half of Chapter Six—is not a call for believers to never have any contact with unbelievers, nor is Paul saying that Christians are to *never* use the secular courts (i.e., courts established by the state). Elsewhere ([Romans 13:3-4](#)), he makes the case for the state to handle *criminal* cases. (Guzik) For example, if I murder someone, though a believer, my case would rightly be handled by the civil courts. But if I, a believer, somehow wrong another believer (e.g., slander, petty theft, dissension) to the point that the one wronged wishes to take action against me, that should be handled within the church, rather than the civil courts.

**Read 1 Corinthians 6:3-6.**

v4

*So if you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church?*

A quick survey of our popular translations reveals that not everyone agrees on how to interpret this verse. There are, essentially, two camps: one makes it a statement (presumably ironic), the other makes it a question; the first implies that the objects ("men of little account") are from within the church, while the second implies that the objects are from without.

Camp One (statement): Original NIV, KJV.

NIV: Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church!

Camp Two (question): 2011 NIV, NASB, NKJV, ESV.

ESV: So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church?

There are arguments to be made for both interpretations ([older commentators favor the statement that suggests those within the church, while most modern commentators favor the question pointing to those without](#)), but I am persuaded by this: The only way the *statement* interpretation makes sense is if it is delivered—and *received*—ironically; that is, Paul is stating with irony that instead of taking their disputes to the secular law courts, they should be appointing “no-accounts” in the church as judges to settle these matters.

While either interpretation can be made to work, a better fit seems to be the *question* interpretation which refers to those outside the church, which flows more smoothly out of vv1-3, where he takes the Corinthians to task for airing their dirty laundry in the secular courts, following it with (v4), “So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church?” (ESV)

v5

*I say this to your shame.*

In Chapter Four Paul said that his purpose was *not* to shame the Corinthians.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 4:14.**

Now, however, in this setting he comes right out with it: “I say this to your shame”—that is, their behavior has brought shame upon them. And he follows this with a quick jab to their pride:

*Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren,*

We have established that the Corinthians were impressed with their own “wisdom,” as well as the Hellenist “wisdom” of the Greco-Roman community in which the church dwelt. From 1:17 to the end of Chapter Two, Paul addresses their misplaced devotion to human wisdom, and their pride in their own. And in that extended rebuke, he touches on something that speaks to this situation in Chapter Six.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 1:22-29; 2:4-5.**

[More on this in a moment.](#)

Here in v5 the apostle employs irony and sarcasm to rebuke the church. A Lampel paraphrase: *You think you are so smart, so wise—yet for simple disagreements between two of your Christian brothers, you can’t find even one person wise enough to adjudicate? Shame on you.*

Paul tops this off, in v6, with a strong statement—or question, depending on the translation (NASB, ESV); the meaning is the same—an exclamation of incredulity.

*but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers?*

“goes to law” translates the verb *krinein*, which means “to hale before a court”—that is, one Christian brother hauls another Christian brother into court to accuse him before a civil judge.

Don’t miss the importance of Paul’s decision to refer to them as “brothers.”

*David Garland:* The following verses reveal that Paul is not upset simply because they aired their dirty linen before unbelievers but that they resorted to lawsuits at all. Brother Christians are pitted against brother Christians, adopting a cutthroat, adversarial relationship rather than one based on love and selflessness. The church appears to be infested with enmity between members, and he deliberately chooses an image from the family [*adelphos*] to remind them of their brotherhood... Paul uses the image of brothers slinging accusations against one another to shame them for impiously violating their brotherhood.

Here is their most egregious offense: behaving like adversaries, rather than brothers.

## CONCLUSION

Now I want to return to those passages in Chapters One and Two.

Look at vv1:24-25.

but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Let us not lose sight of the reasoning behind all this—the overarching theme of this first half of Chapter Six: The church is not to be literally separate, isolated from the rest of society; the church is to be *distinctive from society*. We are to be different, with a higher standard of behavior, answering to a Judge higher than any other on earth. Compared to the sovereign Lord who will judge us, the members of the US Supreme Court are no better than first-year law students.

This does not mean that we are free to disregard civil laws; it means that Christians have an *extra* responsibility, an extra burden to keep not just civil laws, but *God’s* laws—that is, the precepts, standards, and ways from His written word. And this is what renders the church and each of its component parts—the individual believer—distinctive.

We might wonder: What is the basis for Paul’s jaw-dropping incredulity over someone (or perhaps more than just one) suing a Christian brother in civil court? Why is he so exercised over this—not just expressing disagreement and correction, but one can almost hear him banging his head against the wall in frustration over their stupid behavior?

In Chapter Two Paul paints a picture of people who are to be—indeed, who *are*—distinctive: different from the world around them. He first applies this to himself, offering his own behavior and manner of speaking as an example, in vv4-5:

and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

Then in the following paragraph he demonstrates how this same basis for speaking and living is to be a decisive force in their midst.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 2:6-8.**

How did they obtain this “wisdom in a mystery”? From where did they obtain the ability to comprehend it?

### **Read 1 Corinthians 2:10.**

The Corinthians are in possession of God’s Holy Spirit, who, in turn, is in possession of “even the depths of God.” We—you and I, everyone who has placed his or her trust in Christ Jesus—have within us a direct, unbreakable connection to the mind, the power, the wisdom of very God! And then the apostle learns, as he rhetorically seeks confirmation in v1 of Chapter Six, “Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints?” No wonder he is banging his head against the wall! *What are you, stupid!?*

- Every believer in Christ possesses the Holy Spirit, who, in turn, knows the mind of very God.
- Every believer has as his Father, very God who never turns away the prayers of his children.
- Every believer stands now and will stand one day before the righteous Judge of all creation.
- Every believer, in Christ, will one day have a hand in judging the entire world—even angels.

With all that, how can we even *think* of relying on the unsaved to judge our family disputes?