

## Jason Upchurch - 1 Cor. 6:1-8 - A Theology of Lawsuits

This morning we come to a very unusual section of 1 Corinthians, but I think what we're going to find out is that it is extremely practical for us on all kinds of levels. The big picture here is that, as believers, we don't sue one another. We don't take each other to small claims court. I think that's really the idea here. Christians who have been washed by the blood of Jesus who has cancelled all our debts are to readily cancel one another's debts.

Christians in the Corinthian church were having disputes over smaller financial arrangements and rather than settling them inside the church they were airing their disputes in public legal hearings. This was an absolute shame to the church.

And I think this is going to be practical because if you are in the church long enough you will eventually make contacts and maybe even have financial arrangements with each other. Let me just run through a whole bunch of scenarios:

- 1) Maybe you want your house painted and you want a professional - we've 2 guys who do that and so you ask them.
- 2) Maybe you want someone to help you sew up a dress for a special occasion - we've got a gal.
- 3) Maybe you need help with some yard work and you want to ask one of our strapping teenage boys.
- 4) Or you want a date night and so you ask one of the teenage gals to watch your kiddos.
- 5) Maybe you've got a car for sale and someone needs a car. It's not the most reliable car, but you'd make them a bargain.
- 6) Maybe your thinking a dog might be a nice addition to your family and you're eyeing German Shepherds or Mini Poodles.
- 7) Maybe you need some insurance or some computer work done or electrical help.

I think you're getting the idea. At some point you're going to want or need a service that someone in the church can provide. And the church can be a great place to connect with people and do business with people. We're not a social club or a business club. Many years ago I had a guy ask if we could make a business directory at church. I wasn't excited about that. But business transactions happen in the church.

The church has always been like this. Paul was a tent-maker. Luke was a doctor. Most of the apostles we're pretty handy with a fishing boat. Matthew knew his way around a balance sheet.

There's always been business partnerships inside the church. And the rub is knowing how to make a fair deal.

Sometimes it's odd asking people you know for a service. Are you asking your friend for help, or are you asking a trusted business person? Are you expecting something for free or are you expecting to pay? And what about them? Are they expecting to charge or are they wanting to give away their services?

Just because someone in the church does something doesn't mean they'll do it for us for free. Some people don't have that kind of padding in their balance sheet or in their schedule. And what can happen is that if we're not careful and clear we can get sideways with people.

Sometimes it's odd, sometimes it's uncomfortable. You'd think we're all grownups and could discuss these matters easily but the honest truth is sometimes we're just really bad at it. We're often very bad at communication.

And what can happen is that if we're not careful feelings can get hurt or people feel slighted. Maybe we assumed some things or arrangements were not explained or understood or there was miscommunication. And as trivial as all this sounds, these kind of things can cause serious problems within the church. People can become bitter, complaining can break out, mistrust builds.

And as we see here, if it's not bad enough, people start thinking about lawsuits. And once we go down that road the gospel itself is slandered among unbelievers.

Now, although we don't know all the details, the setting here seems to be smaller financial arrangements gone bad. I'll explain why that's important in a minute. But here's why I believe that. **Look at Vs. 7-8. Read**

There are 3 words that are used that help us here. Lawsuit, and the word defraud which is used twice. Those words are used throughout the NT in relation to financial dealings.

Lawsuit - NIV / ESV  
Cheated - NIV

The word defrauded - used twice here - usually refers to something that is financially owed to someone else.

In **Mark 10:19** it's used to mean don't steal.

In **Acts 16:19** when Paul cast out the demon from the girl who was a fortune teller, the men who owned the girl said they had been defrauded - they were out money.

**James 5:4** land owners defraud their hired workers when they don't pay them on time.

So this is a financial arrangement between two believers that has gone bad. Why is that important to understand? Because sometimes Christians do actually need to contact legal authorities because of other Christians. There are times we need to call the cops.

It seems like every other day another report comes out of a pastor or ministry leader who abuses young people. Or there's a husband who beats his wife or kids. Or a mom who's doing drugs with babies in the household. And often the story is that there was coverup. People knew for a long time and turned a blind eye. They said "We'll deal with it in the church, we don't need to call the cops." And this passage is often used as a reason to not call the authorities.

That's why you need to understand, from a technical and grammatical point, that is not what this passage is talking about. This talking about minor financial offenses.

You need to know that if I have someone tell me that abuse is going on, I am legally obligated - and I would say morally obligated before the Lord - to call the police within 24 hours. As bad as financial arguments are, they are nothing compared to the wicked coverup of all kinds of abuse that runs rampant in churches by people who seem to be godly men and women.

I think this also is not talking about people who are committing felonies against each other. If you have someone who intentionally steals \$10,000 worth of stuff from you, that's different than a misunderstanding. That's different than, "Oh I thought you included this in the service with this estimate."

This is something we need to understand in this section. Paul says in **1 Cor. 13** that loves believes all things, hopes all things. There's a certain "think the best about other people" attitude that Christians are called to have toward each other. Love covers a multitude of sins. It is the glory of man to overlook offenses. Those are all biblical principles.

But they don't cancel out wanton, willful, substantial sin against one another. There is no limit to the grace of Jesus to forgive sinners, but I want you to understand that this passage does not mean we can just do whatever we want to each other and then we're required to let bygones be bygones.

The context is really what we might call small claims court. These are relatively minor financial transactions that have gone sideways.

Okay, that's just the introduction. With all that in mind, the real issue here is not even that there are financial disputes in the church. We'll always have financial disputes or misunderstandings because we're sinful and poor at communicating. The real issue here is that the believers in Corinth are going to a secular court to help them settle their financial disputes.

That's the real issue here. They're taking their dirty laundry and airing it out for all the pagan world to see. **Read 1**

So these grievances are not being resolved between the people involved. And we really know nothing else about them. We don't know how many there were, although it seems like it was a common problem - common enough for Paul to address this early in his letter.

Also, the issue here is not that the Corinthian small claims court - or their judicial system - is filled with particularly nasty people. The NIV says "Do you dare take it to the ungodly?" That gives more the impression that the legal system in Corinth was particularly corrupt. It may have been, but I think that's missing the point. The point is that here are believers who are going to unbelievers for help resolving matters.

Two people who have been reconciled to the God of the universe through faith in his crucified Son can't figure out how to resolve their own dispute. That's pretty pathetic. And Paul uses shame language: do you dare to do this? "Are you kidding me?"

And then he gives 3 theological reasons this is absurd.

1) Because the saints will judge the world. **Read 2**

I mentioned last time that our theology matters; even on small issues. Having a comprehensive understanding of all that the Bible teaches has an amazing ability to guide our lives.

Jeopardy: "This doctrine stops small claims lawsuits among believers." What is believers will judge?

if you were to ask me what Bible teaching would potentially stop small claims lawsuits I wouldn't have guessed in a million years that the answer would be: we will judge the world.

But that's the answer. Did you know that as a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ we are going to judge the whole world? The Bible doesn't go on at length about it, but it does give us a couple of insights.

You don't need to turn there, but there's an brief passage in **Dan. 7:22** where Daniel has this amazing vision of one like the Son of Man coming to the Ancient of Days to inherit an eternal Kingdom. We know this to be Jesus. When Jesus ascended into heaven he received for himself an eternal Kingdom.

And in **Vs. 22** there's a part where the saints in the Kingdom are being destroyed when the ultimate role reversal happens: As I looked, this horn made war with the saints and prevailed over them until the Ancient of Days came and judgement was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time came for the saints to possess the Kingdom.

I think Daniel is seeing a vision where Jesus ascends, the world persecuted the saints, until the Day Jesus returns and judgment is handed over to the saints. The saints get to judge those who persecuted them.

**Look back at Matt. 19:23-30.** This is right after Jesus's conversation with the rich young ruler, you remember that? He's a rich guy but he keeps the Law. So Jesus tells him to go seek everything and give it all to the poor and follow him. And he walks away because he likes his stuff. That's when we read this. **Read 23-25**

Jesus says salvation is essentially not a possibility to anyone with any possessions. Not possible. Why? Because we are idolators. We all love our stuff and our money more than God. We just do. We are all the rich young ruler. That's why the disciples are kind of freaking out. "Who can be saved?" Good question. If we were to stop here I think we should all be nervous but Jesus gives us hope. **Read 26-27**

Jesus gives us hope. Salvation isn't up to us, it's up to God. And with God all things are possible.

Then, of course, Peter thinks he's got an angle. "Hey, wait a minute - we're not rich at all. We gave up everything to follow you! We're poor, so we're in, right Jesus?"

And what Jesus says next is supremely important: following Jesus is never a sacrifice. Maybe you lost some friends. Maybe you lost a job or some family. Maybe you've been persecuted. But what you have coming God will make up for in spades. **Read 28-30**

You might lose everything in this life, but Jesus gives you 100-fold more than you can imagine. The disciples are promised the ability to judge in the new world - or the regeneration. I believe that's the New Heavens and New Earth when God makes all things new. They are given that promise and I believe by extension, so are we.

Why's that?

**Turn to Rev. 2:26-27.** This is in one of the letters from Jesus to the seven churches in Asia Minor. And this is the promise at the end of the letter to the Church in Thyatira. **Read 26-27**

Again, this is a specific promise to this church, but generally speaking we can apply these promises to all those who are faithful. We will rule with the authority Jesus has.

**Turn to Rev. 20** - our favorite passage about the millennium. The thousand years of peace everyone likes to fight about (Doug Wilson).

No matter what your end times view, this passage alludes to the saints reigning. If you're pre-millennial, you believe Jesus will come back and reign on the earth with the saints for 1,000 years. If you're post millennial you believe that the reign of believers has already started in the sense that we are - right now - co-heirs with Christ and therefore in a sense judging the world right now and will be magnified into glory. If you're amillennial, you're right. You believe that this is talking about the saints in heaven right now reigning with Jesus which will roll into the New Heavens and New Earth. Or maybe you've got some other idea. **Read 4-6**

There's more going on here than we can unpack, but know that one way or another the saints reign with Christ. I don't believe that's a present reality, I think that's a future reality one way or another.

Reigning by definition includes judging. Pronouncing right or wrong over people under us. How will all that work? I honestly have no idea. The Bible really doesn't elaborate. In fact, Paul's words in **1 Cor. 6** are almost a little odd. Look at them. **Read 2**

He expects the believers in Corinth to know this. Don't you guys know you're going to reign and judge? It's a little bit of a "you know better than this." So he taught on this before. They probably had a better idea of what judging and reigning looks like than we do. Between these few verses, the Bible says precious little.

But the argument here is important. It's from the greater to the lesser. If we're going to judge the whole world with Jesus - and we will - then we should be able to settle small disputes between each other.

I'm always amazed at Chief Financial Officers in corporations who manage hundreds of millions of dollars of company assets, but they can't even create a budget for their own home and they end up filing bankruptcy. Really? You manage hundreds of millions but you can't balance your own checkbook?

That's his point. And actually it's the same point he makes about angels. The second reason taking another brother to court over small financial disagreements is absurd is:

2) Because the saints will judge angels. **Read 3-4**

So, again, we have this lesser to greater argument. "We're going to judge angels, so we should be able to take care of someone owing someone else a few hundred bucks." Your theology of the eschatological judgment of angels matters when someone stiffes you a few hundred.

And I think most Christians would go: Time out - we're judging angels? Yep, we're judging angels. Again, this is not advertised readily throughout the Bible but the Corinthians seemed to have known about it. It was common knowledge. Where do we see angels getting judged?

Some pretty odd places. **Turn to Matthew 8:28-34.** This is the famous miracle of Jesus cast out the demon Legion into the pigs that then go and drown themselves. Matthew's gospel adds an interesting little tidbit that Mark and Luke don't mention. **Read**

They ask Jesus: have you come to torment us before the time? What is that? It's the return of Jesus. Satan and his demons have some reign before Jesus returns. When Jesus returns - that's the time he has in mind - their freedom is over. These demons are asking "Are we getting tossed into hell sooner?"

That's amazing, they know they're getting judged, they know they're going to hell, they just want to play for a little longer.

**Turn to Jude 6-7.** Here again we see demons getting judged. **Read 6-7**

So remember back in **Genesis 6** when the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were attractive and took to themselves women. I believe that was demons somehow taking on human flesh and attempting to create a hybrid race. As crazy as that sounds, I think that's what it's talking about and one of the reasons is this passage. Angels, fallen angels, just like Sodom and Gomorrah, indulged in sexual immorality. When's the only time we see that? Genesis 6.

In any case, what they did was so bad that God moved up their condemnation. They're in hell now. The legion of demons is still loose to this day. The fallen angels from Noah's day were so bad God said, "Nope, you're done now. You're in hell until you can be fully judged."

There is still a day of judgment coming. Both for people and for angels. And it seems that just like God will include the saints in judging people, so too he will include the saints in judging angels.

Is it just fallen angels - demons? Or is it holy angels as well. It seems like Paul says "angels generically so I believe it's likely both.

I mean, we haven't even seen angels. They're around us all the time. **Heb. 1:14** says they minister to us - so they see us. But in God's grace, through the gospel, he has charged us to judge them.

Angels are more powerful than us.

The angel in Revelation is so massive he puts his feet on either side of a river.

Jesus says he can call on legions of angels to completely overthrow the Roman regime - a legion is a lot, but not that big. That means they're strong.

Twice John sees an angel in the book of Revelation and they are so awesome, so glorious, so power that he is overcome by worship thinking that they are God. The angel rebukes him for that. And one day that angel will stand before John and Jesus and us in judgement.

Angels are more versatile than us - they operate in the spiritual and physical world. They have amazing influence over physical bodies, over unity in your marriage and in the church. They have the ability to prowl around, like Satan their father, and devour people. And they can wage spiritual war against holy angels like we see in the book of Daniel.

Angels are smarter than us, stronger than us, have seen the face of God. Angels don't have any faith - they only have sight. There is no such thing as an atheist angel because they all know God and Jesus and the Spirit by **sight**.

Yet through faith in Jesus God has commissioned us to judge them. We are weaker, we are mortal, we don't see the spiritual realm as a matter principle.

And usually the lesser doesn't judge the greater. It's not too often the employees judge the boss.

But through the gospel we are co-heirs with Christ and will rule and reign and judge with him the most power and influential creatures God has ever made.

Paul says, if you're going to judge angels, isn't there someone in the church who can help you work through a financial misunderstanding?

It'd be like asking Tom Brady to coach your kid's football team and he's like "I don't know, I mean what do I really know about football?"

We're going to judge angels. And we're going to judge them with all the truth and principles we already have here in the word of God. And if we're going to judge them we can sort out the small stuff.

Which brings us to the third point:

### 3) The saints have all the wisdom they need in Christ. Read 5-6

We have everything we need to figure out these disputes. Seriously, if you and a brother or sister in this church go sideways on an interaction, come talk to me. Or Andy or a whole bunch of other people who could help mediate. We can work it out. This is a cake walk compared to what will come.

Not too many people think to come to the elders, or at least mature godly men in the church, to help decide small financial squabbles but here we are.

The Word of God is all we need for life and godliness. It might be that you're upset that someone shortchanged you and we side with them. Or maybe we side with you. Or maybe you're both guilty. But, you guys, we have what we need to judge minor matters like this.

Last reason we don't go to court:

### 4) The gospel is at stake. Read 7-8

Paul's point is that it would be better, for the cause of Christ and the sake of the gospel, to just eat the financial loss.

Look at it this way, we'd spend a couple thousand dollars to send someone on a mission trip to a foreign country for the opportunity to show them the love of Jesus. Would we spend \$500 to show someone here the love of Jesus? Of course.

So flip it. If someone shorts you \$500 and you're thinking about taking them to court, just imagine that what you're doing by eating the \$500 is protecting the integrity of the gospel. You are saving the gospel from public slander and humiliation.

In the OT every 7 years and every 50 years there was a Sabbath and a Jubilee. You know what part of celebrating the Sabbath and the Jubilee was? Cancelling debts. The records of debt were cleared.

Jesus is our Sabbath rest, and he is our Jubilee. You how we as Christians celebrate? Being willing to forgive debt at all times.

The bottom line for Paul is taking one for team Jesus. Wouldn't we rather be defrauded or taken advantage of so that Jesus's name is not dragged through the mud? Of course. So don't bring family disputes in front of the pagans.

Listen, we're going to experience this on some level. If you're in the church long enough, you will. Eat the loss. Take the hit. Not because you're a nice guy, not because you're better. But because the reputation of Jesus and his saving grace is on the line.

**Pray**