

1 CORINTHIANS 6

COMMENTARY

1 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? 2 Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? If the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? 3 Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more matters of this life?

6:1 The Apostle Paul continues to lament over the problems which have erupted in Corinth. He inquires, “When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints?” (ESV). Paul has just addressed how the Corinthian Believers were supposed to be internally disciplining themselves, and removing sinners from their midst (5:12-13)—but as is witnessed, this is something they were completely incapable of doing. Rather than resolve their problems internally, various Corinthian Messiah followers are witnessed taking others to the pagan courts. This is not just a failure of these specific individuals; it is a failure of the assembly as a whole.

Readers are not told the specific reason why lawsuits had erupted among the Corinthians, although with the sin of incest having just been addressed (5:1-2), it has been interjected that the civil disputes here may have involved property issues involved with such behavior.¹ More generally, a figure like Paul did recognize a role for the Roman state in offering some degree of order (Romans 13:1-8), and how the taxes of Believers did facilitate stability. However, the different cases that the Corinthians were going to their local, pagan courts to receive a judgment on, were cases which should have been handled by the Believers themselves.

Paul’s issue with the Corinthians going before the pagan courts, was not necessarily that the Corinthians pursuing a court case would not receive some degree of justice. Paul himself had to use the Roman legal system (Acts 16:37-39; 25:10-12), although he did not have a positive experience with it in Corinth (Acts 18:12-17). Paul was incensed that it was unbelievers (v. 6) who would be deciding the affairs of (purported) Believers.² The clause *krinesthai epi tōn adikōn* (κρίνεσθαι ἐπὶ τῶν ἀδίκων) is more literally, “go to be judged before the unrighteous” (YLT). What would it indicate of this fledgling branch of Judaism, for the Messiah followers to go before such unrighteous, to seek their judgment? F.F. Bruce makes the observation,

¹ Barton, in *ECB*, 1326.

² Witherington, pp 162-164 summarizes some of the legal procedures that would have existed at the time.

“Every Jewish community throughout the Roman Empire and beyond its frontiers had its own *bêt-dîn* [בֵּית דִּין], its own competent machinery for the administration of civil justice within its own membership; the least that could be expected of a Christian church was that it should make similar arrangements if necessary, and not wash its dirty linen in public.”³

There was certainly Tanach precedent for the establishment of judges in Ancient Israel (Deuteronomy 16:18-20), which the First Century Synagogue had taken direction from, in forming Jewish courts and a system of conflict resolution. Yeshua Himself had also issued direction regarding how His followers were to resolve their conflicts, both individually and communally (Matthew 18:15-17). Frequently, commentators will make light of various Talmudic statements, which communicated how going before the pagan courts was to be steadfastly avoided by ancient Jews:

“R. Tarfon would say, ‘In any case in which you find gentile law courts, even though their law is the same as Israelite law, you may not go to them, since it says, “These are the judgments that you shall set before them” (Exo. 21:1) – before them, not before gentiles. Another explanation: “before them,” not before those who are not experts!’” (b.*Gittin* 88b).⁴

Modern readers of Paul’s exclaim, “When any of you has a grievance against his neighbour, do you dare to go to law in a sinful pagan court, instead of laying the case before the saints?” (Moffat New Testament), might be a little taken aback, given how most of us today would without hesitation take a fellow “Believer” before our Western courts. One of the major differences, between then and now, is how our Western courts have been influenced—although that influence is waning—by Biblical principles of justice. The same was not true of the courts of the Roman Empire.

6:2 Given the widespread Corinthian preoccupation with knowledge, their actual lack of it is considerably staggering. With many Corinthians absorbed with their wisdom, knowledge, and understanding—of human origin—their conduct has not been enhanced, but instead retarded. Paul admonishes, “Do you not know, then, that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is judged by you, are you then unfit for the most trivial lawsuits?” (*Lattimore*). The righteous are promised an inheritance in God’s Kingdom, reigning with the Lord (Daniel 7:22; 12:3; Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30; 2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 20:4; 1 Corinthians 15:24-28; cf. Wisdom 3:8; 9:12; Sirach 4:15).

As Gordon D. Fee notes, “Here he is speaking of the *final* judgment on ‘the world’ as a whole, the entire anti-God system of things that will come under God’s judgment, in which God’s people are in some way to be involved.”⁵ It is specifically witnessed in the DSS, “He will give the power to pass judgment on the Gentiles to his chosen, and it is at their rebuke that all the wicked of His people shall be condemned” (1QpHab 5.4-5).⁶ Revelation 2:26 is more to the point: “He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, TO HIM I WILL GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS [Psalm 2:8].”

³ Bruce, 59.

⁴ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

⁵ Fee, 233.

⁶ Wise, Abegg, and Cook, 118.

If the redeemed play a future role in God’s rule and judgment, then surely they should be able to exercise some authority over minor matters of the present life. This is something that the Corinthians were incompetent of doing. Beyond their gross immaturity, what else might this signal? Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner make the poignant assertions, “*Present* judgment of people who belong to the world are not their responsibility. Believers will, however, be involved in the *future* and final judgment of the world. As so often with Paul, the critical question is, What time is it? Eschatology for Paul is not a divine jigsaw puzzle to be solved, but a sure hope to be reckoned with now; the future carries weighty implications for conduct in the present.”⁷ If many of the Corinthians actually thought of themselves as being people of the future Messianic Age, then they should demonstrate this by their good conduct and proper judgment.

While the Corinthians going to pagan courts would surely indicate spiritual and ethical inadequacies—which a figure like the Apostle Paul would be incensed by—another significant factor not to be ignored is how Believers taking their own to the Roman courts, brought with it major risks. At the very least, the Roman court was a place where the rich frequently took advantage of the poor,⁸ a conflict between the rich and poor detectable later in his letter (11:17-34). Recognizing how the Roman court was often a place not to receive justice, Richard B. Hays directs,

“The overwhelming majority of civil cases were brought by the wealthy and powerful against people of lesser status and means. 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; furthermore, those of high standing had the funds to hire professional rhetors to argue their cases and, if necessary, to bribe the judges.”⁹

Hays goes on to note a statement of Petronius’ *Satyricon*:

“Of what avail are laws where money rules alone, and the poor suitor can never succeed? The very men who mock at the times by carrying the Cynic’s scrip have sometimes been known to betray the truth for a price. So a lawsuit is nothing more than a public auction, and the knightly juror who sits listening to the case gives his vote as he is paid” (14).¹⁰

What could Roman law actually do for the Messiah followers? How dangerous was it for Messiah followers to take their own before the pagan court? While fiercely debated at times among people in our contemporary Messianic movement, the very Torah passages detailing “one law” or “one statute” for the native of Ancient Israel and the sojourner (i.e., Exodus 12:48-49; Leviticus 24:22; Numbers 9:14; 15:15-16, 29-30), were to see that people in the community were afforded equal treatment in matters of jurisprudence.¹¹ This was not at all the case when one went before the Roman judicial system, as there were multiple standards

⁷ Ciampa and Rosner, 228.

⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, pp 222-223.

⁹ Hays, 93; also Sampley, in *NIB*, 10:853-854.

¹⁰ Petronius: *Petronius With an English Translation*, trans. Michael Heseltine (London: William Heinemann, 1913), 19.

¹¹ For a further discussion of these passages, and related issues, consult the author’s article “Approaching One Law Controversies: Sorting Through the Legalism,” appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper*.

held, frequently with the rich being given more leniency and the poor being shown contempt. Craig S. Keener informs us,

“Roman law, effective in Corinth, like most other ancient laws except Israel’s, decreed harsher penalties for those of lower status. Thus an aristocrat might be banished but a low-status person crucified for the same crime...Many recognized that this system was subject to abuse by the wealthy, either lamenting or warning against such abuse.”¹²

That the Roman justice system would be guilty of showing favoritism, toward those who committed offenses, is detailed in the record of Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.79-80).¹³

6:3 Paul’s disapproval of what has been happening in Corinth deepens, as he asks, “Do you not know that we are to be the judges of angels, to say nothing of ordinary matters?” (Goodspeed New Testament). The Septuagint rendering of Psalm 8:5 states how “Thou madest him a little less than angels, thou hast crowned him with glory and honour” (LXE), indicating how human beings are considered to be less than God’s angels. But the redeemed who get to reign with God, actually get to judge the angels, which we should think involves the fallen angels (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6). Paul’s logic is sound: if the redeemed are to participate in the judgment of the angels in the future, why can the Corinthians not issue some judgments on things that are *biōtikos* (βιωτικός), “matters of this world only” (Phillips New Testament)?

4 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 [assembly]? 5 I say *this* to your shame. *Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren, 6 but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers?*

6:4 There are some differences of perspective surrounding Paul’s word, which the ESV has neutrally rendered with, “So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church?” How are readers to approach *tous exouthenēmenous* (τοὺς ἐξουθενημένους), “- being little esteemed” (Brown and Comfort)¹⁴? In the NIV, one sees the view that these people are those within the assembly: “Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church!” The TNIV/2011 NIV would later reflect the opposite view: “Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, do you ask for a ruling from those whose way of life is scorned in the church?”

¹² Keener, 52; also Garland, pp 197-198.

¹³ “...whereupon Tiberius inquired into the matter thoroughly, by examining the priests about it, and ordered them to be crucified, as well as Ide, who was the occasion of their perdition, and who had contrived the whole matter, which was so injurious to the woman. He also demolished the temple of Isis, and gave orders that her statue should be thrown into the river Tiber; while he only banished Mundus, but did no more to him, because he supposed that what crime he had committed was done out of the passion of love; and these were the circumstances which concerned the temple of Isis, and the injuries occasioned by her priests. I now return to the relation of what happened about this time to the Jews at Rome, as I formerly told you I would...” (Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.79-80; *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 481).

¹⁴ Brown and Comfort, 590.

The NEB is more clear: “If therefore you have such business disputes, how can you entrust jurisdiction to outsiders, men who count for nothing in our community?”

Not all are agreed that *tous exouthenēmenous* are outside pagans issuing judgments for the Believers,¹⁵ even though the tenor of v. 5 following does lend strong support for this. Fee indicates, “it is difficult to imagine Paul, even in irony, so referring to fellow believers—especially in light of 12:21-25, where he attempts to disabuse the Corinthians of viewing the body of Christ in such a way.”¹⁶ James 2:6 makes the critical assertion, “But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court?” Here in v. 4, the issue is going to the pagans for their legal judgments—although they would have no standing in the assembly of the One True God.

6:5 Paul is not happy with the Corinthians to whom he is writing. He lets them know quite candidly, “I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers...?” (ESV). Corinthian arrogance (3:21; 4:6, 8, 18-19) has gotten the better of them, and this is not the only time Paul will speak something to his audience’s shame (15:34).

If the Corinthians addressed were truly wise, then why did civil disputes among the Messiah followers have to go before non-Believers, pagans? Were these people truly incapable of settling problems themselves? Were the wise not able to consult the precedents in Tanach Scripture of God’s people establishing judgments for themselves (Deuteronomy 1:9-18; 16:18-20)?

If the Corinthians were wise, establishing a form of self-regulation and dispute mediation, then they would be more effective as the Messiah’s representatives in the midst of Greco-Roman paganism. Hays describes, “this way of handling disputes would keep problems within the jurisdiction of the community rather than disgracefully playing out their arguments in front of outsiders.”¹⁷ The Corinthian Messiah followers regulating their internal problems was not just a matter of their testimony of faith or their level of spiritual maturity, but it was also a matter of their credibility to the world at large. The Believers should be able to have a pristine system of solving disputes, being fair and equitable to all, far superior to what the pagan courts could offer. But, inability to resolve disputes, was just one result of a whole host of problems that besieged the Corinthians. David E. Garland further details,

“The failure of the Corinthians to carry out...internal discipline suggests that they lacked [godly] attributes. Some Corinthians may have resorted to [the pagan] courts out of habit. They had not yet been converted from their old mentality of asserting hostility toward others and their old way of doing things. The church was also riven by factions and appeared to lack a sense of its mission to be a witness to its world as an alternative society constrained by God’s love to seek the welfare and salvation of others.”¹⁸

6:6 Paul is pretty angry with what has been going on among the Corinthians: “But instead does a brother or sister have a lawsuit against another brother or sister, and do they

¹⁵ Garland, pp 205-207 favors the despised here to be the lowly in the congregation, made judges as a means to balance the inequities between the elite and disenfranchised.

¹⁶ Fee, 236.

¹⁷ Hays, 95.

¹⁸ Garland, 201.

do this in front of unbelievers?" (Common English Bible). The Corinthian Messiah followers should have been mature enough to handle their internal difficulties, but instead the unrighteous at large get to hear all about how, at the very least, these purported Believers in the Jewish Messiah are little different than they are. Leon Morris comments, "It was extraordinary that brother should want to go to law with brother at all. But if he did, it was even more extraordinary that he should do so before *unbelievers*."¹⁹ The Corinthians being admonished, are little different than the pagans around them. The way Anthony C. Thiselton puts it is, "Christian failures diminish the credibility of the gospel as it is; but to advertise the failures is utter folly and disaster."²⁰ It would have been one thing if the internal problems and disputes that had erupted, had just stayed constrained as an internal matter not to be discussed with outsiders. This has not happened, and so one degree of shame is compounded with another degree.

7 Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? 8 On the contrary, you yourselves wrong and defraud. You do this even to your brethren.

6:7 The failure of the Corinthians to be able to solve their problems is explained in rather stark terms by Paul. He inquires, "Therefore, to have legal disputes against one another is already a moral failure for you. Why not rather put up with injustice? Why not rather be cheated?" (HCSB). Yeshua Himself had certainly issued examples in His teachings of when it was acceptable at times for His followers to suffer or endure wrong (Matthew 5:38-42; Luke 6:29). The issue witnessed here, among the Corinthians, is that shame and dishonor have been witnessed, just in how they were immature and ineffectual so as to be incompetent of solving problems internally. As Morris states, "To go to law with a brother is a defeat in itself...The gaining of the verdict matters little. The cause is already lost when a Christian institutes a lawsuit."²¹ Even if only a small few of the Corinthian Messiah followers were involved in judgments against one another, the whole community of Believers did suffer—and were hardly acting as a corporate Temple of the Holy Spirit (3:16).

What kind of defeat would the Corinthians here have experienced? Thiselton thinks, "The desire for self-preservation which *lacks the courage to make oneself vulnerable in a first stage of interpersonal, face-to-face* pleading with understanding escalates into a confrontational, self-centered *defense* (a military image) of one's *rights*."²² Rather than resolve the issue among Believers, going to the pagan courts would have apparently brought with it a greater threat. While we do not know again what issues had to be decided, it may have been that some of them were over rather small matters. What makes things really bad for the Corinthians, is how Paul's word actually finds a parallel in the works of Plato: "of these two,

¹⁹ Morris, 92.

²⁰ Thiselton, 435.

²¹ Morris, pp 92-93.

²² Thiselton, 436.

doing injustice and suffering it, we assert that doing injustice is the greater evil, suffering injustice the lesser” (*Gorgias* 509C).²³

6:8 Rather than various Corinthians doing the honorable thing, and enduring a necessary degree of injustice for the integrity of the Body of Messiah, Paul exposes their faults: “Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers and sisters” (TNIV). What has happened will affect the community of Messiah followers in Corinth both internally and externally. The view of Hays is that “Paul’s rhetorical move in verses 7-8 implicitly accuses the Corinthians one more time of failing to act like true *sophoi*; once again we see him turning their own philosophical categories against them, beating them at their own game.”²⁴ The Corinthians, impressed by human concepts of wisdom and knowledge, have not reached such a standard—much less the standard of God Himself.

9 Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, 10 nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Yeshua the Messiah and in the Spirit of our God.

6:9 Vs. 9-10 include what many would consider to be a vice list or catalogue of sins, something which is witnessed in the Apostle Paul’s letters. V. 9 opens with the question, “Don’t you know that the unjust will not inherit God’s kingdom?” (HCSB). The attitude and behavior of the Corinthians, toward fellow Believers, could very well lead them to act in an unrighteous manner, and to some significant sins.

What continues in v. 9, as is rendered in the TNIV, is, “Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor practicing homosexuals.” While all readers will agree that prohibited sins are detailed here, not all today are agreed on *oute malakoi oute arsenokoitai* (οὔτε μαλακοὶ οὔτε ἀρσενοκοῖται). A slight variance is witnessed in the NRSV, which has, “Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites.” Much of the dispute over how to approach *oute malakoi oute arsenokoitai* does involve a First Century standpoint of what sins Paul has in view. At the same time, liberals who argue that the Bible is permissible, toward homosexuality and same-sex relationships, will often conclude that a passage like 1 Corinthians 6:9 only has homosexual prostitution and/or pedasty (a minor boy in a sexual involvement with an elder man) in mind.

Customarily, *oute malakoi oute arsenokoitai* has been viewed from the perspective of *malakoi* identifying a passive role, while *arsenokoitai* identifies an active role.²⁵ The term *malakos* (μαλακός) is defined by *BDAG* with, “**pert. to being yielding to touch, soft,**” as well as

²³ Plato: *Gorgias*, trans., James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University, 1998), 107.

²⁴ Hays, 96.

²⁵ Bruce, 61; Morris, 93; Blomberg, 118.