

Prayers

Opening prayer

Your ways are ways of peace, Lord Jesus; so make us agents of Your peace. Your ways are ways of love, Lord Jesus; so make us carers of others. Your ways are ways of truth, Lord Jesus; so give us hearts to explore it and speak it. We ask this because peace, love and truth are Your gifts to us and we long to use them according to Your will. Thank You Lord, AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

Be quiet before the Lord and select a favourite passage of Scripture to read. Let the Holy Spirit speak to you afresh through these familiar words.

On-going prayers

- **Pray about air we breathe.** *Pray about the concerns we have today over air pollution. Pray that scientists will be able to give us a true picture of the hazards we face due to various forms of pollution today, for example, nuclear, chemical, biological*
- *Give thanks to God for the faithful service of public servants whose work is largely unseen and unheard*
- *Pray for whatever is headline news in your own country today. Make the effort to find out more about it from the internet or from reading news items you might otherwise ignore*

Meditation

Lord God Almighty:

Give us joy;
that we may delight in You and Your presence;

Give us mercy;
that we may do what is right for those in need;

Give us faithfulness;
that we may not let other people down;

Give us grace;
that we may reflect the love of God in the world;

Give us kindness;
that our deeds may be a blessing to others;

Give us patience;
that we may continue to trust You all the time;

Give us peace;
that we may rest and be refreshed in You;

Give us love;
that we may follow our Saviour in all we do;

Lord God Almighty;
Give us Yourself; so we may witness to Your glory.

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 6: 1-11

¹ When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare take it to court before the ungodly instead of before the saints? ² Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge far less significant cases? ³ Do you not know that we will judge angels? Why not everyday matters! ⁴ Moreover, when you have to make such judgements, why do you set them before people who have nothing to do with the church?

⁵ I say this to shame you. How can it be that there is no wise person among you capable of assessing a dispute between fellow believers, ⁶ so instead, one believer goes to court against another, and this in front of unbelievers? ⁷ The very fact that you take each other to court means that actually, you have already been defeated! Why not rather accept being in the wrong? Why not rather be swindled? ⁸ But instead, you do wrong and you defraud, even other believers!

⁹ Do you not know that the wicked will not take possession of the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor those who practice homosexuality ¹⁰ nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

¹¹ Now this is what some of you were: however, you were cleansed, you were made holy, you were put right before God in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Review

This is an extraordinary passage of scripture. We already know that Paul was upset that the Corinthians were unable to deal with their differences and had formed 'party' groups, at loggerheads with each other (1:10f.). Now, however, we discover that they had taken their disputes outside of the church, and disputes between believers were being decided in the local courts (6:6)! Paul writes with astonishment at this (6:1-8), and calls on the Corinthians to maintain the purity of the church (6:9-11). The last verse of this passage is a clarion call to God's people to take hold of their heritage of holiness through the Gospel of salvation (6:11), something that holds all God's people together despite differences. As such, this verse is a popular preaching text, but one that was first spoken to counter dissention and strife within the church.

It almost beggars belief to read that in those days, Christians at Corinth had been taking each other to court (6:6)! Certainly, Paul was aghast. We do not know exactly what was disputed, whether civil matters such as financial claims, property rights, or personal disputes and litigation, we can only guess. As far as Paul was concerned, the same spirit of division that kept the Corinthians divided obviously flowed over into other areas of life. Paul had already written to counter their party differences (1:10f. 3:5) and now he would have to deal with their litigation!

In challenging this state of affairs, Paul says firstly, '*do you not know that you are to judge the world*' (6:2). This is an astonishing claim if Paul were to describe individual rights, but he was focussing on Christ, not on individuals; he had already written to tell the Corinthians that they must be united in Christ, '*when you are assembled ... my Spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ*' (5:4). So when this passage speaks of people judging '*the world*' (6:2) and '*angels*' (6:3), it does not mean that God's people will yield any individual power over people or angels. It means that when God's people are united in their Saviour, they stand with Him in authority over all created things. On the one hand this is an apocalyptic vision of the 'End Times', when God will establish His rule over all the earth, through Christ. On the other hand, this unity and authority are available to God's people even now, through Christ alone.

Paul appeals to the Corinthians to accept this high calling and have nothing to do with earthly courts. In view of their unity in Christ, something already available to God's people when they accept each other, they have the power of Christ to judge all things and resolve their disputes. Therefore, the resort to worldly authority is scandalous (6:4-8). Paul is shocked even to think of believers exposing their differences to non-believers (6:6); it was a defeat for God's people! He declares that personally, he would rather '*accept being wrong*', or be '*swindled*', than submit his affairs to an earthly court, outside the providence of God (6:7)!

In verses 9 and 10, Paul lists the immoral behaviour that disqualifies someone from inheriting God's '*Kingdom*' (6:10). He does this not just to remind the Corinthians of their pre-Christian past (6:11), but also to fire a warning shot across the bow of those who brought personal disputes before earthly courts. Previously, in chapter 5, Paul had attacked a man who lived with his father's wife, and it seems that he felt that behind the appeal to earthly courts lay immorality, and a desire to escape God's justice. He knew that sin that led people away from Christ and away from unity in the church. So he called on the Corinthians to turn from their sins and aspire to the true holiness of those who placed their trust in Christ alone, '*you were made holy, you were put right before God in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God*' (6:11).

The message of our passage is surely this; whatever the problem, God's people may find the solution in Christ. Although this sounds idealistic, Paul insists that this principle is sound. Only sin makes this impossible, and only sin therefore pushes the Christian to seek redress in earthly courts. Paul does not say more here about how judgement may be properly exercised within the church; we will have to go to other Scripture and the teachings of Jesus in particular for this (see for example, Matthew 18:15f.). His focus is on the unity God's people may find in Christ and the need to stand against the sins that prevent this.

Going Deeper

- Notes on translation of passage
- See you in church? Or, see you in court! (6:1-6)
- Pay the price for the sake of the Gospel (6:7,8)
- Clean, holy and right! (6:9-11)

Notes on translation of passage

V1 'does he dare take it to court before the ungodly and not before the saints?'

There are some strong and uncommon words here in the Greek; 'dare' could mean 'bold enough', or 'have the personal courage to' and expresses Paul's incredulity. The whole sentence is governed by the Greek word for 'and not' which indicates that this is the action he would expect.

V1 'the ungodly'

There is no moral judgement involved here, because this means only those outside the Christian community; the difference is between those inside and outside the church.

V3 'why not ordinary matters?'

It is extremely hard to translate this Greek because the words used here for 'why not' ('merte ge') are a very strong expression in Greek and not found anywhere else in the Bible. We could translate this 'why on earth not', but although this would convey the sense of the Greek, it would add extra words not there which could be construed as unhelpful. In addition, the word for 'ordinary matters' is the Greek 'biotika' meaning roughly, the 'things of this life'.

V4 'why do you set them before people who have nothing to do with the church?'

There is a great deal of argument about verse 4. Some Bible versions say this; 'do you not appoint those of least esteem within the church to judge?' and as a consequence, some think that the text means we should take the most lowly people in the church and give them positions of authority to assess contentious difficulties! I doubt this is what Paul means because it is contrary to much of his other teaching. I (along with most translators) suggest a more open translation, in which Paul sounds aghast at the idea of non-church people being involved in making any judgments about things within the life of the church. This translation also connects well with what Paul says next in verse 5

V7 'why not rather be swindled?'

The Greek says 'why not rather be robbed', meaning that you must bear the loss of not winning your case. In the instance of the innocent party, they would remain swindled – hence my translation.

V8 'do you not know that the wicked will not take possession of the Kingdom of God?'

Many translations have 'will not inherit the Kingdom of God'. However, the Greek word here means not so much 'inherit', which can be a matter of not doing anything at all, but of actively doing what it takes to receive the inheritance; that is, taking possession of the Kingdom.

V9 'those who practice homosexuality'

The Greek words used here are two that refer disdainfully to the passive and active partners in male homosexual acts. They have no direct equivalent in English in common use.

V11 'you were cleansed, you were made holy, you were put right before God ...'

You may be familiar with the expression 'you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified ...'. However, each of the alternatives I have given are standard ways of translating the worlds concerned in Greek, and each of them adds a little more to our understanding of the phrase. I have given this translation because the standard words 'washed', 'sanctified' and 'justified' often need to be explained, and my translation takes the reader a little closer to a plain understanding of the text (see study).

There are three stages to Paul's argument here. Firstly, it is wrong to take civil matters of dispute between two Christians to court outside the church (6:1-6). Secondly, the Christian should be prepared to renounce his or her rights in order to preserve the greater good of the unity of God's church and therefore its witness to the Gospel (6:7,8). Thirdly, all this is true because the church is a people who are saved, holy and have God's presence (6:9-11). These three will form the structure of our further exploration of this text.

See you in church? Or, see you in court! (6:1-6)

The issue is immediately obvious as soon as the passage starts. It is hard to translate the firm language accurately, but Paul uses a few words in this passage not used elsewhere in the New Testament, and the word for 'does he dare to' is somewhat out of character for him. Why would someone want to deal with a private matter of 'grievance' (6:1) between two Christians in a Roman court (or equivalent in whatever part of the Empire)? As if to emphasise the point he wished to make, Paul described God's people, the church, as 'saints'. He was always attempting to encourage Christians by using such words; surely, people would appreciate knowing that they were God's 'holy one's', set apart for the glory of God and for His great plan of salvation, made available through their faith! Paul did not use the word with caution, as we might do today because of those who feel that they are not good enough to be called 'saints' and object to being addressed as such!

Paul asserted strongly that there was no reason for Christians to resort to courts outside the church when dealing with each other because the authority within them was far greater than that outside the church; and in making this argument, he said, 'do you not know that you are to judge the world?' (6:2). For us, the answer might be that we were not exactly aware of this, but Paul certainly thought that those who read his letter would know what he was talking about. There is not a great deal within the Bible that talks about God's people standing in judgement with God over other parts of creation, whether human or angelic but it was certainly strong within Judaism in the first century. Certainly, a number of what are called 'apocryphal' and 'deuterocanonical' books of the Bible (used in Jesus' day but not commonly accepted as part of the Bible in the Protestant tradition) speak about this clearly (Wisdom of Solomon 3:8, Enoch 1:9, 38:5, 48:9 etc.). Jesus came close to saying this in Matthew 19, where He says; 'When the Son of Man is seated on the throne of His glory, you who have also followed me ... judging the twelve tribes of Israel' (Matt 19:28).

The principle by which Paul insists on this point is that God alone is the one judge of all things, and the judgements we make all come from Him; so when the end of all things comes and His people are united with Him in glory, they will join in the activity of judgement. The sure hope of this is provided by the evidence of what happened to Jesus, who died, was raised, went to the Father, and joined Him seated in authority (Acts 1:9f. 2:25f.). In this capacity, all things in heaven and on earth, including angelic, are subject to such judgement. Paul, along with others of his day, undoubtedly believed that demons were some form of 'fallen angels', for example, who would be judged at the last (see Rev 18:2f.).

This power was therefore all available to God's people, and in the name of Jesus Christ, should be applied within the life of the church. As with all things within the life of the church, Jesus was the key.

Paul mocked the idea that people 'of no consequence to the church' (6:4) should sit in judgement over the life of those who belonged to God. Were not those he addressed the same people who had boasted earlier of their wisdom (2:1f.), so why did they lack sufficient to deal with their own crises? This was a cutting criticism to say the least, and the implication of what Paul said was that it should surely not be necessary for disputes to be dealt with, because why should Christians be falling out with each other (see notes above for verse 4). Paul recognised the necessity of a Christian to go to a Roman court for the purpose of business or other dealings with the world, but for sorting out the church's problem, it was an emphatic no.

Pay the price for the sake of the Gospel (6:7,8)

Paul was horrified that Christian should be arguing with Christian over any matter, as he had already made clear. So much of the first five chapters of his letter had been taken up with trying to account for and defuse the terrible divisions that had arisen between Christians, the thought that they were fighting over other issues was like a great defeat for the Gospel (6:7). What had been taken to court? We cannot be certain, but there is a clue. Paul included sexual immorality in the list of the wicked coming up in this passage (6:9), and the discussion of this issue in the previous chapter (see notes for 5:1) indicated that due to a quirk of Jewish legalism from a previous century, the church allowed a man to marry his step mother and the Roman state did not! It is very possible that this was the issue that had gone to court, and if this was the case, then it was a profoundly bad witness to the Gospel. Some suggest that Paul's lists and the occurrence of 'sexual immorality' in this passage cannot be assumed to mean this, but in my opinion, it is worth considering, because I am not sure that Paul was in fact casual with his lists.

The latter part of what Paul says is the real challenge for us today, however, because it goes to the heart of the feeling and anguish that are created by division and breakdown. In this passage, Paul asks each Christian to be sure to make a personal judgement. If they feel that they have been badly treated by

someone else in the church to the point that it requires a legal decision of some sort, is this matter bigger than the importance of the Gospel of Jesus? Paul knew full well that all of us feel things very deeply, and when we are affronted or when people have swindled us or robbed us, we believe that before God, justice must be done. Firstly, Paul says that between Christians, we must not take it to court but deal with it inside the church; secondly, we should consider where this issue stands against the call of Christ to spread the Gospel! How can we say that even the most difficult of our personal issues are worth compromising the Gospel (6:7)? Yet how hard it is to accept such a truth when we face personal hurt or financial distress. Surely this is something that all God's people should give careful thought to before such circumstances ever arise. Have we sufficient spiritual judgement to put our own feelings and sense of justice to one side, in order to preserve the unity of the church of God and the integrity of the proclamation of the Gospel.

This is a deeply important issue, and I suggest that if we took it seriously, then many of us would be spared the horrors of some of the divisive issues that have broken churches and compromised the Gospel in recent history. If we have spent time to consider this, then we can bear not going to court and suffering loss if our brother insists that they do so, and we also have the personal integrity to face any internal church process our leaders may suggest to sort out the problem, and deal spiritually with the outcome.

Clean, holy and right! (6:9-11)

In the last three verses, Paul questions who is a true member of the church in Corinth, and in so doing makes us question who we regard as 'Christians' in our own churches. He gives a long list of people who are sinners and will not inherit the Kingdom of God, saying that such cannot inherit the Kingdom (6:9,10). If you look closely, you will find that the evils mentioned are the same ones mentioned in the previous chapter (5:9,11), except that Paul adds two words which denote the dominant and the submissive partners in male homosexuality. It may surprise us to know that Greek had such words and that Paul used them, but he did so to state his own concern at sexual deviance within society, and showed that he had a level of understanding of the practice that went beyond mere prejudice. It would be wrong of us to speculate too much about the meaning of Paul's list here, save to comment that its close similarity to what was said in the previous chapter probably suggests that he had specific issues in mind, perhaps even people. We already know that in writing 1 Corinthians, Paul was working from a report sent to him from someone in 'Chloe's house' (1:11).

Whatever Paul may have thought about our modern practice of keeping the doors of the church open for all people, there was a clear division in his mind between those who had committed themselves to Jesus and those who had not. Paul was unrelenting in his insistence that those who unrepentantly continued to practice sin could not possibly have accepted Jesus into their lives in any meaningful way, and they would not inherit the Kingdom. This, of course, is something we must always bear in mind, and it requires our fine and prayerful judgement today. Moreover it lies behind Paul's last comment in this passage, the famous verse 11.

There is not enough time and space for a full exposition of the three great words which make up the heart of Paul's definition here of who is a Christian, but the words are powerful. The first word 'cleansed' is sometimes translated 'washed', but it is doubtful that Paul had baptism in mind here. He meant that the soul who had accepted Jesus as the Son of God by faith and repented of their sin, was cleansed by the blood of Jesus, and their sin no longer had the power of death over them. Of course, baptism represents this, but the point is the cleansing here, not the baptising. Secondly, Paul said that a Christian was one who had been set aside to be holy for God; he says 'you were made holy'. Being holy was therefore not something to aspire to, or something to aim for, but one part of the great gift of God that brings salvation. It is something to rejoice in and for which we must give glory to God, but not something we parade or presume upon. Thirdly, by the death of Jesus and our acceptance of what He has done for us, we are put right with our God, or as Paul says in his famous letter to the Romans, we have 'peace with God' (Romans 5:1,2). This again is not something to which we aspire, but a gift we have received. Paul's point is simple. In comparison to those who persist in sin, a Christian is one who knows what Jesus has done for them, and by faith, accepts this and rejoices in it.

After such a passage of scripture, we can only be grateful for such a conclusion!

Discipleship

Application

Dealing with disputes and the life of the church

It would be true to say that most established churches have protocols and systems of discipline for dealing formally with its appointees, generally ordained people and other office holders. At one time, all such protocols were based on the principles of Paul's advice given here in 1 Corinthians 6, together with a few other related texts. Over the course of time, however, many of them have been changed to reflect the laws of the countries in which a church is set. For example, there are some in the UK that permit the use of trades unions in the resolution of disciplinary issues. Such things do indeed affect a few people, though most who go to church would not dream of dealing with personal matters whether family, marital, or financial through the church. They simply do not see this as the purpose of the church. In this, we are just like the Corinthian church; for good or ill, we probably deal with a few personal disagreements within the fellowship of the congregation, and if our concerns have legal aspects, then we turn to the normal processes of the law in our countries. Paul might weep that people have not listened to his words of strong advice.

You, like me, will probably be thinking that it would be impossible and impractical to set up any proper and resourced system of dealing with disputes within the church. It is simply not on anyone's agenda. However, when we are dealing with disputes within the life of the church, there is no excuse, for we must surely open ourselves up to the Word of God and make sure that we deal with the things of the spirit in a spiritual way. Surely the best way to start is to ensure that when we have problems ourselves, we take all Paul's advice and act upon it, seeking all suitable means to deal with it within the church. This includes being prepared to accept being at a disadvantage in the face of our accusers without hope of restitution, if that means the greater glory of the unity of God's people and the mission of the church.

All of this is extremely important and worthy of our careful attention. I can only ask that you consider it all with great care.

Questions for groups

1. How can you in your church best deal with disputes and problems that arise between members?
2. Discuss what it might feel like to try to accept that the Gospel is more important than some personal issue standing between you and another Christian?
3. How do God's people show that they are 'cleansed', 'made holy' and 'put right with God' and what does this mean to those outside the church?

Discipleship challenges

- *Pray for those you know who have been badly affected by something that has happened at church, and might be tempted to take either the church, or another member of the church, to court.*
- *Ask yourself to consider carefully how you respond to this passage of scripture, and take the opportunity to discuss it with others if possible.*

Final Prayer

Jesus, we give You our praise, knowing that You are with us in remarkable ways; for You read our minds, You touch our hearts, You see what our eyes see and You sense our feelings. However, Lord Jesus, please make Yourself known to us in each and every moment, and guide us according to Your will by the power of Your love. AMEN
