

The Fractured Body

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[0 : 00] Well, let's prepare ourselves to hear God's Word. The way you can do that is by keeping your Bibles open. If you happen to have the sermon outlined in front of you, that might help as well. But especially important is to prepare your hearts to be ready to be humble, to hear God's Word, and to ask Him for His help. So let's do that now.

Heavenly Father, we always need your Holy Spirit to illuminate for us the Word that you have inspired the Apostle Paul to write. So we ask for your help again. Please illuminate not just our brains, but our entire being, that your Word and especially your Gospel might be shaping us.

Please continue through the Book of 1 Corinthians to shape our culture as a church overall, that it might be more and more in line with your will. We just commit all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

At the end of last year, a Nigerian man stood in the dock of the KL Sessions Court and pleaded guilty to cheating a real estate company manager of more than RM300,000.

Now that in itself is not particularly noteworthy. After all, there are plenty of cheating cases every year. But what drew the attention of many people was his name. This Nigerian man was called Innocent Christian.

[1 : 22] Yes, that really was his name. And so of course the jokes started flowing. Just imagine him in court. One online commenter said, Your Honor, I'm innocent.

Imagine his argument, you know, but sir, how can you find me guilty? I'm an innocent Christian. But of course alongside the jokes were a few more serious comments. One person said he's innocent by name, but not by nature.

Another said he should be ashamed of what he's done. He's obviously not lived up to his good name. There was a group of people in Corinth who also bore the name Christian.

They had not existed previously, but in the first century, a man named Paul came, told them about Christ, and they responded by trusting in Jesus, receiving his grace, and calling him Lord.

And as they came into fellowship with Christ, they came into fellowship with one another. But now this group was not living up to its name.

[2 : 27] They were a church with many problems, which if you've been following us over the past two months, you would have heard all about already. They were cliques and factions and pride.

But what really laid at the root of their problem was this. They were still worldly. That's how 1 Corinthians 3 verse 3 puts it. They were being shaped more by Corinth than by Christ.

And this was true as well in the area of disputes. You see, if you stay in church long enough, you'll eventually have a dispute with someone. You'll have a conflict with someone.

We will sometimes wrong one another. We will sometimes offend one another. Usually unintentionally, but sometimes even intentionally. But the problem isn't the mere existence of disputes.

It's how we respond to it. It's how we approach it. And the Corinthian church failed to let the gospel shape how they handled their disputes. In doing so, they failed to live up to the name of Christ.

[3 : 35] And so the question before us today is, what about us? What about KEC? How will we settle any disputes that arise amongst us?

If we rub each other the wrong way, how will the gospel make us different? And like before, how we respond will be a good test of how gospel-centered we truly are.

And so this morning, we're going to learn from 1 Corinthians 6 verse 1 to 11, how gospel-centered communities handle disputes. And so make sure your Bibles remain open in front of you.

And let's dive in. Firstly, gospel-centered communities don't resort to avenues that are ungodly. In verse 6, we're introduced to the problem.

The Corinthian Christians have been having all sorts of disputes and dragging each other to the secular courts. We're told in verse 7 that they're basically suing each other.

[4 : 42] And so these are civil disputes. Now, we might find it difficult at first to believe that something like this could ever happen. But actually, there are plenty of situations that could easily lead us down this path.

Perhaps there's a Christian landlord in a church who's agreed to rent out a room to a fellow believer, but the person renting has been late on paying up several times and has in fact not been paid up at all for the last few months.

What's the next action? Or two Christians go into business together, but now there's been a falling out and the senior partner is threatening litigation against the junior partner.

Or perhaps you have two actual siblings in a church fighting over and contesting a will. Now, these are all actual situations that have taken place in actual churches in our time.

And so this is not just a first-century issue. It's ours as well. So civil disputes are in view, which means that we are not talking about criminal matters here.

[5 : 48] Now, that's important to say. Should we ever discover that in our church, a serious crime has been committed, like, say, child sexual abuse, then we have an obligation not to hide that.

We shouldn't attempt to deal with all of it in-house. That's what some churches have done in the past with sincere intentions about trying to protect the good name of the church.

But actually, it has the opposite effect. It is absolutely not the right thing to do. And that would be a misapplication of today's passage.

We must report such crimes to the police. Elsewhere in Romans 13, we are told that we are to obey earthly authorities in such matters because God has appointed them to execute justice in this case.

1 Corinthians 6 doesn't negate that. But here in Corinth, verse 1, the Christians have been bringing civil disputes before non-Christian judges instead of bringing it before the church.

[7 : 00] Now, why is that so distressing to Paul? Let's find out. One big clue is in verse 1. The Christians are bringing their cases before the ungodly or the unrighteous, as some other translations put it.

You see, the Roman civil law system wasn't exactly fair and objective. There is plenty of historical evidence that it was rife with corruption. Judges and jurors were open to receiving bribes and being unduly influenced.

Furthermore, just as is often the case today, the court system favoured people who had higher status and greater resources. Retaining a lawyer is expensive.

And so the overwhelming number of civil cases were brought by the rich and the powerful against people of lesser means. That means it was quite likely that the Christians who were filing lawsuits often had the means to do so and that those on the receiving end were often the poorer Christians.

And furthermore, it was often no holds barred during court proceedings. The lawyers were not afraid to resort to personal insults, to character assassination and just being plain nasty.

[8 : 26] And so it appears that at least a few well-resourced Christians in Corinth were using the judicial process to humiliate and shame a fellow Christian.

They were leveraging their superior economic or social power to pound a more vulnerable Christian into submission for their own selfish gain.

And that's probably why Paul makes this charge in verse 8. You yourselves cheat and do wrong and you do this to your brothers and sisters.

And so given this social and historical context, it's no wonder Paul is upset. How dare you, he says in verse 1. Why do you resort to such ungodly avenues?

For in the end, what the Corinthians are doing is fundamentally anti-gospel. After all, what is the gospel? The gospel is a message about how God wants to demonstrate his righteousness, as Romans 3 verse 26 puts it.

[9 : 36] The gospel is a message about how someone of lofty and powerful status, God's son Jesus, came to those who were weak and lowly.

That's us. And he did so in love, coming to even his enemies. For the gospel is fundamentally a message of reconciliation, of those far from God being brought near to him, of Christ turning enemies into friends.

And yet the Christians in Corinth were denying the gospel through their actions, if not in words. By bringing their disputes before the unjust and the unrighteous, and by exploiting the judicial system, they were denying not just the content, but the power of the gospel.

After all, remember what Jesus said in Matthew 18 last week? Jesus says, if another Christian has sinned against you, you go and work it out with him or her, with the hope of winning them over.

In other words, gospel-centred communities are communities where the goal is always reconciliation. Because reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel we preach, and that gospel in turn provides the motivation and the enablement to do so.

[11 : 10] Secular courtrooms can't provide that. But the very existence of lawsuits here in Corinth amongst Christians indicates that they had very little interest in reconciliation.

Matthew 18 was likely not being practiced at all. And so the gospel was not shaping their practice. And so what's the application for us?

Well, don't resort to ungodly avenues, so don't go to pagan courts to settle conflicts between Christians. That's the most obvious implication. Now, this doesn't mean that Christians never resort to judicial means.

Famously, in the book of Acts, the apostle Paul appealed to his status as a Roman citizen to stand in Caesar's court to ensure that he was not subject to unjust proceedings.

There might be times where we might need to go to court either to protect the interests of the gospel or the interests of others. So judges and lawyers still have a role to play.

[12 : 22] Those of you who are lawyers can breathe a sigh of relief. But it is not the place to attempt to bring two Christians together. How can it be when the entire system is set up to be adversarial and the judgments are not governed by God's word?

Civil courts might be able to make rulings on legal and property issues, but they have no power to deal with matters of the heart.

And at the end of the day, heart issues are at the root of many disputes. And only the church can effectively carry out the ministry of the gospel necessary to deal with those.

But here's a slightly less obvious implication. We should also be careful in how we leverage the power we might have. Remember, by going to the pagan courts, some of the Corinthian Christians were really using their economic power, the means they had at their disposal, as a weapon against their brother or sister in Christ.

And the danger for us is that we could easily act in similar ways. Now, we might not necessarily go to court, but we could use our power in other ways to be ungodly against our brother or sister.

[13 : 54] Now, I suspect most of us don't think of ourselves as powerful in any way. I'm not rich and I don't hold any high position in society, you might think. But I've been reading up on power lately as it's been something of a focus in the last few years in our world, especially the abuse of power in light of things like the Me Too movement.

And if we understand power more broadly to be the capacity to act on something or the capacity to produce an effect, then all of us hold power of some sort.

For example, some of us have verbal power. We are just naturally more eloquent, more gifted in the way that we use our words.

And so when it comes to disputes, we could use those words to wound rather than to bless. We could use our words in such a way to manipulate people over to our side, to subtly put down the other person, to write passive-aggressive blog posts in public, and so on.

Or some of us have institutional power. By that, I don't necessarily mean that we have an official position in the church. And yet, because we come from a family that spans three generations and have deep roots in the church that we attend, we possess a certain influence, one we might not even realize.

[15 : 29] And so again, the question is how we use that. In a dispute, the temptation is to use that in an ungodly way, to appeal to our networks to protect our position, or in more extreme cases to bully others, knowing that our family background means that less people will dare challenge us.

And so whatever power we might have, let's not use it in ungodly ways. Instead, let the gospel shape the way we approach our disputes. Which brings us to our second point.

Secondly, gospel-centered communities judge in light of their future reality. In verse 1, Paul makes clear that such disputes should be brought before the church.

Now, in the Old Testament, God set up judges and courts for Israel, who are meant to hear disputes between Israelites. Deuteronomy 1, verse 16 to 17, and 16, verse 19 to 20, make clear that they are to do so impartially, not fearing any man, whatever their status, but to follow God's just ways.

In other words, they are to judge according to God's standards. And this Old Testament background likely informs the way that the church is meant to settle disputes too.

[16 : 55] As Christians open the word of God and humbly study it, and as they pray constantly for spirit-filled wisdom, they are more likely to make judgments and decisions that are in line with the ways and the will of God.

But Paul also gives another reason for keeping disputes in the church. Look at verses 2 and 3. Do you not know that the Lord's people will judge the world?

And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels how much more the things of this life? Paul seems to be picking up on another verse from the Old Testament, from Daniel 7 verse 22, that believers will one day judge the world.

We'll even judge angels. 2 Peter 2 verse 4 suggests that it could be fallen angels in particular. Now, this isn't really expanded on anywhere in the Bible, and it's certainly not Paul's concern here.

He simply assumes that the Corinthians are familiar with such teaching. Do you not know, he says, meaning that they should. And so he wants to just draw out the implication.

[18 : 19] Now, what is that implication? Well, let's look again at what Paul is saying here. Look, he says, look at what the gospel has given you. Look at what Christ has given you.

In the age to come, you will have the privilege of being law lords together with Jesus in judging the world and the angels. But, if the world itself is going to be judged by you in the future, then surely in the present you can exercise good judgment and discernment in these ongoing smaller disputes.

disputes. If you are going to be elevated to the Supreme Court, surely you can handle these little cases in the kampong. Or put another way, if you are going to judge the unrighteous at the second coming, why are you now going to the unrighteous to judge you?

Is it possible, he says in verse 5, that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge between believers? My old pastor, Vaughn Roberts, has a helpful way of illustrating these verses.

Paul, he says, is like the wife of a newly appointed high court judge who ignores a quarrel between his two daughters. As the screaming and the hair pulling continues, he refuses to get involved and expects his wife to deal with the problem until she shouts at him, you're about to become a high court judge, making decisions of national importance.

[19 : 59] So surely you can sort out petty disputes between your two children, put your newspaper down and do something. And so Paul envisions gospel-centered communities as places where peacemaking and mediation can and should happen.

He envisions them to be a place where elders and otherwise mature, experienced Christians will take the initiative to help brothers and sisters in Christ deal with any unresolved disputes.

he envisions them as places of judgment and arbitration, such that the relationship between two believers can be preserved and the witness of the gospel maintained.

My guess though is that in many churches, including in ours, we don't naturally see church as a sanctuary where we can honestly try to settle our disputes.

if there is a conflict, we often choose to just avoid the person that we're in conflict with. Or, if we are not in conflict but are aware of one happening between two other Christians, we just tiptoe around the issue.

[21 : 23] Sometimes, one of the parties even leaves church via the back door rather than confront the situation. And yet, the more I read the New Testament, the more I realize that such artificial harmony is not what God wants us to aspire to.

Now, God clearly wants peace. Take Romans 14 verse 19 for example. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

Or Ephesians 4 verse 3, make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. But it's easy to misread those verses as saying, well, let's just do our best to preserve harmony by saying and doing nothing.

But in light of places like Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 6, and other places, Paul is actually saying, when there's conflict and disputes, let's deal with it properly by talking about it openly, just the two of you, or if it appears that you need assistance, then by bringing it before the church.

In fact, see this as a blessing that you can tap into the wisdom of experienced Christians to sort out certain issues. True peace comes only if we are willing to work through conflict, not tiptoe around it.

[23 : 01] Perhaps today you're locked in a dispute with another Christian, and you realize that you just need help to sort out things between the two of you. Well, why not pray and take a step of faith to ask an older, wiser Christian to help you?

in the past year, I've tried to see that as one of my responsibilities, to help bring together brothers and sisters who are not at peace with one another.

It's an area that I'm still growing in myself. And I hope that in the long term to help all of us grow in this area, because this is a call to the whole church, not the pastor alone.

One of the things I'm hoping within the next five years maybe, is to take us as a church through a course called Resolving Everyday Conflict to help us gain and implement a more biblical understanding of dealing with disputes.

So as those who will one day judge the world, let's resolve to grow in maturity in this area, so that we will live up to what we will one day be.

[24 : 13] Gospel-centered communities judge in light of their future, reality. But that's not all we should do. Thirdly, gospel-centered communities are willing to suffer injury.

In verse 7, Poe highlights the key issue. The trouble with all these Christians suing one another, he says, is that in the end, no matter who wins, we all lose.

The mere existence of all these lawsuits means that we've all been completely defeated already. Why is that the case? Well, put yourselves in the shoes of a non-Christian in Corinth.

Maybe you've heard Apollos preach, and you can't help but think, you know, even though it sounds funny to my ears, maybe there is something in this message about Christ crucified.

There's something even attractive in hearing about how this shameful cross actually covers my shame and restores my relationship with God. But now, you watch all these Christians fight with one another in court, and what would you think?

[25 : 27] Ayah, all their preaching is just talk, it's just hot air. Look, in the end, they're just like the rest of us in Corinth. How can it be true that I can be restored to God by Jesus when his followers can't even restore their relationships with one another?

It's just total foolishness. And so the church loses. The good name of the gospel loses and Satan wins.

So what's the remedy? There is one way, Paul says. The question is, are you guys ready to hear it?

The answer is the gospel. But it's not the gospel in abstract form. It's the gospel pressed into your life. It's the gospel brought down to earth and aimed right at your heart.

Are you ready for it? Look again at verse seven. wrong. Why not rather be wrong? Why not rather be cheated?

- [26 : 46] What is Paul saying? He's saying when you've been offended, when you've been defrauded, when you've been deceived, when people owe you, what will you do?
- Would you seek to assert your rights? Would you claim your entitlement? Would you want to inflict vengeance? Or will you be willing to suffer insult, injury, pain, loss, damage?
- Will you be someone who bears the name of Christ? You see what would a gospel centered person do? He would rather bear the cost rather than cause further harm to his brother or sister.
- For this is the way of Christ. When we've been wrong, we deserve justice, we say. But why not be willing to give up your rights to forego justice if it serves the larger cause, if it lifts up the name of Christ?
- Why not be willing not to seek compensation for that substandard piece of work or take the financial hit for that rather bad deal?
- [28 : 20] Why not be willing to say I forgive you? Now I know that straight away we're thinking of all the exceptions.
- What about this situation or that situation, we might say. And just so that we're clear, certainly we are not saying that a vulnerable person should put herself in grave danger at the hands of a violent domestic abuser, for example, or that we should keep giving cash to a serial borrower who's clearly spending it the wrong way.
- But let's not make all these exceptions that we're thinking of in our head as a way to escape what the Holy Spirit wants to do in our hearts.
- For the moment your heart naturally says, I have my rights, is the moment when the gospel's work in your heart is put to the test.
- Do you believe in Jesus? Do you trust him? Because look at your saviour and your Lord, 1 Peter 2 verse 23.
- [29 : 35] When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.
- On the cross, Jesus did not retaliate. He did not seek revenge. He absorbed the wrong. He absorbed the wrong that you did to him.
- He knew that one day, God will make all things right. And that was enough. Why not rather be wrong? Why not rather be cheated?
- Why not let the gospel shape how you handle your disputes? I heard a story about two Christians.
- They went to different churches, but they asked two pastors to help them resolve a dispute that they were having. They had gone into business together. One had paid the other some upfront money for a job to be done, but later he claimed that the other guy never delivered, and so he wanted his money back.
- [30 : 51] And so the two pastors took the time to listen to their stories, both together and then separately, and after listening, praying, and seeking further advice from other sources, they determined that the guy had a rightful claim.
- The work wasn't done, and so the money should be returned. Now, it had already been agreed that the pastor's decision would be binding. But in the process, the pastors discovered that the guy who needed to pay the money back had fallen on very hard financial times.
- And so the pastor looked at the winner and said, Brother, you have received justice, but now you have the opportunity to show mercy.
- mercy. Now, I'm not the Holy Spirit. I'm not God. This is not a command. It's your choice. But you have the opportunity to show mercy.

And this brother did. He was wrong. He had a rightful claim, and he chose the way of the gospel. He forgave the man of his debt.

[32 : 17] What a wonderful story. Would that have happened in the secular law courts? Doubtful. But in God's kingdom, it does.

You see, in the end, why would this man want to do this? Why would you, if you call yourself a Christian, want to do this?

Jesus? There can only be one reason. Jesus. Because Jesus did this for you and for me. He turned the other cheek, let people mock him, didn't say a word to defend himself, to die on the cross, to take your place, the innocent for the guilty.

For don't forget, what is the story of this world? The story of this world is not that we are the ones who have been wrong and cheated. The story of this world and of our lives is that we are the ones who have wrong and cheated God.

And make no mistake, people like us don't deserve to inherit the kingdom of God. It doesn't matter what's our specific sin. Verse 10 makes clear that none of them qualify us to be citizens of his kingdom, to be called God's temple, to be judges of this world.

[33 : 48] And Jesus could have come the very first time with a sword. He could have held us to account, have us thrown into the prison of hell, and he would be perfectly just in doing so.

He could have asserted his rights, but he didn't. Instead, he took our place. he suffered the ultimate wrongdoing, so we would be right with God.

And now, we have been given new autobiographies. Look at verse 10 again. Some of us were sexually immoral, or idolaters, or adulterers.

Remember, lust is already adultery of the heart. And this is not exhaustive. We might not be these things on this list, but maybe we were proud, or angry, or jealous people.

But whatever it is, look now at verse 11. This is what some of you were. Past tense.

[34 : 57] It's what you were. It's not what you now are. You've been given a new autobiography. And when you open up the pages of that autobiography, it says, wash clean, set apart for God, declared righteous in his eyes.

Why? Because Jesus gave up his rights and was willing to suffer injury. And so, will you be willing to give up your rights and suffer injury for his sake?

God's sake. In the end, the only way gospel-centered communities can have the supernatural strength to handle disputes in the way God wants us to, is to drink continually from the well of the gospel.

And so, fourthly and finally, gospel-centered communities rest on Jesus Christ, who has given us a new autobiography. Gospel-centered communities remember that they don't come to God as creditors, claiming our deal, but simply as beggars, begging for mercy.

And God looks at us with compassion and says, granted, as he justifies the guilty. innocent Christian is no longer just the name of a Nigerian man.

[36 : 35] It's our name as well. And because we know that this name is ours only by mercy, we are free now to speak mercy to those we're in dispute with.

And so, why not live up to our name and live out our new autobiography here at KEC? Why not rather be wrong?

Why not rather be cheated? Let's pray. Let me pause for this for a few seconds just to let what we've heard sink in as well before I continue.

Heavenly Father, your word has spoken powerfully to us this morning.

Father, we recognize that this is a very challenging word. Father, I recognize that in my own heart, I'm challenged as well, that there are parts of my heart that want to resist this teaching.

[37 : 54] But Father, will you humble me and humble all of us together as a church? Will you help us to look at your son, the Lord Jesus, the one who did not retaliate, the one who entrusted himself into your hands to do what is right?

And so Father, will you help us now to look honestly at any conflict or any dispute that we're currently in? help us to be honest in the ways that we might have dealt with that in an ungodly manner, and instead help us to resolve to do it in the power of your Holy Spirit, to now handle them the right way.

Help us if we need to, to show mercy, even as we trust that you are the just and righteous judge. So Father, please continue to work in all our hearts, even as you remind us that we are no longer people who are outside your kingdom, but that as we show mercy to others, as we seek to follow in the footsteps of Christ, we are ultimately inheritors of your kingdom.

May we always remember the autobiographies that you have given us in Christ. All this we pray in the name of Jesus and for his sake.

Amen.