

“Order In God’s Court!”

I Corinthians 6:1-6

“God wants order in His Court.” Ken Sande, a Christian lawyer and president of Peacemaker Ministries, made the following observation: “By all accounts, America has become the most litigious society on the face of the earth. In the last decade, *civil caseloads* have increased by **33 percent**, which is **five times faster than the increase in our population**. As a result, new case filings in state courts now *exceed 100 million per year*. **This amounts to one court case for every two adults in the United States!**”

Sande goes on to explain: “This surge in litigation is being driven by several factors. To begin with, a lawsuit is often seen as an easy path to instant wealth. In a recent survey, hundreds of Americans were asked how they might become independently wealthy. A generation ago, typical answers would have included, *“build a successful business,” “patent a valuable invention,”* or *“inherit my uncle’s estate.”* These answers hardly appeared on the recent survey. Instead, **the two most common answers were, “win the lottery,”** or **“win a big lawsuit.”** In other words, many people view an *injury as a blessing*, because it gives them a *shot at a million dollar lawsuit.*”

He continues: “Another thing that drives litigation is the **American preoccupation with individual rights**. If we want something badly enough, we begin to think that we have a *legal* right to it, whether it’s a government entitlement or a particular job. And above all else, we think we have the right **never** to be inconvenienced or offended by others. These attitudes are reflected in many of the ridiculous lawsuits being filed in our courts. For example, a poodle traveling in a pet cage was accidentally removed from an airplane in Tampa instead of its real destination, Miami. The error was soon discovered and the poodle was safely delivered to its owners only a few hours late. But the owners were so distressed by the incident that they felt justified in suing the airline for \$50,000 to relieve their *‘emotional suffering.’*”

Now it is pretty easy for us to look at frivolous cases like this one and chock them up to greedy plaintiffs collaborating with greedy lawyers. And to some extent that may be true. But if we stop there and go no further in trying to analyze this problem, we miss a very significant factor that has contributed to this problem of excessive litigation: **the failure of the church of Jesus Christ to carry out its God-given mission to model and teach how to respond to conflict in a godly manner**. As former Chief Justice Warren Burger once remarked,

“One reason our courts have become overburdened is that Americans are increasingly turning to the courts for relief from a range of personal distresses and anxieties. Remedies for personal wrongs that once were considered the responsibilities of institutions other than the courts are now boldly asserted as legal “entitlements.” The courts have been expected to fill the void created by the decline of church, family, and neighborhood unity.”

Sadly, I believe Justice Burger is correct. Especially when churches who ought to be *confronting* the culture actually begin to *mirror* it. Such was the situation where a church refused to pay its pastor extra compensation for the work he did to remodel his own study. So *how* did he *remedy* the dispute? He *sued his own church!*

And then there was another church in which the trustees brought a lawsuit against *their own elders* because of a disagreement over church government. *How can the church confront an unbelieving world with the message of the Gospel of peace and reconciliation if we don't believe that message enough to live it out before the world?*

But this dilemma is hardly new. Paul had to address the same problem in Corinth. Please turn in your bibles to I Corinthians 6. I want to read the first six verses. As I read out loud, please follow along with me:

*1 If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? 2 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 trivial cases? 3 Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! 4 Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! 5 I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? 6 But instead, one brother goes to law against another—and this in front of unbelievers! **“God wants order in His Court.”***

While you can see that this text is addressing what has become an increasing problem in the church today, unless you are currently involved in some kind of dispute with someone, you may still be wondering if it has any relevance for *you*. *I believe it does.*

Some of you have come from situations where you have seen disputes in other churches that were not handled well. You came here because you wanted to be in a place where you felt safe. Where you could grow and raise your family in a place where problems were dealt with and people were helped and their lives were mended—not torn apart by sinful words and deeds. And praise God, He has given us that kind of church by His mercy and grace. But if you want the church to continue to be that kind of church, you need to understand and be committed to following some very important principles that are taught throughout the Scriptures and applied by Paul in this text. Chances are that sooner or later, you will have some sort of disagreement with another person.

How many times have you had an argument with your *own spouse*—and when you tried to talk about it, it only became worse. And the worse it got, the more intense the words. And when that happens, things can come out of your mouth that you would never have dreamed you would say. Things like: *“Well, if we can't figure out a way to make this budget work, maybe its time we got some counsel—from a **divorce lawyer!**”* If you have ever used the **“D”** word, if you have even thought about it—you are already treading on issues that are addressed in this text.

Whether you will have a significant conflict with your spouse, a parent, a child, a sibling, or a brother or sister in Christ, you must not wait until the heat of the conflict to consider

this text. You must understand and commit to these principles *ahead of* the conflict if you want to be successful at pleasing God *in* the conflict. So *what* are the principles? The first one is that ...

I. God is a God of order.

A. He is the *ultimate* Ruler and Judge (“Intrinsic” authority).

The Bible does not set out to prove the existence of a Supreme Being. It simply asserts that God who has always been and always will be created the heavens and the earth. The book of Genesis shows us that God designed and created an orderly universe over which He rules. As the Ruler of His created order, He *legislates* and *executes* His Law which He has revealed generally in nature but specially through His Word. While the much of the world may not acknowledge His rule today, those same Scriptures are full of reminders that God sovereignly rules His creation.

Psalm 47:1-2 summons us to worship this great King:

*1 Clap your hands, all you nations;
shout to God with cries of joy.
2 How awesome is the LORD Most High,
the great King over all the earth!*

As the Supreme Judge of His created order, He passes sentence on mankind, acquitting or condemning depending on each person’s standing before the Law. And even though His justice seems to grind slowly, it grinds surely as Isaiah reminds us with these words:

“...In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.” (Isaiah 42:3-4).

Some might ask: What gives God the right to rule and judge this world? What gives Him the prerogative to *legislate, adjudicate, and execute* His law? The answer: ***He is God!*** He has the *intrinsic* authority to do this because it is His very nature and being. And no one else has this intrinsic authority. ***Only God.***

B. Nevertheless, God in His infinite wisdom has *delegated part of the responsibility of carrying out his order through man.* In the ancient world, when a King wanted to let a recently conquered nation know who the new leader in charge was, he would set up images of himself in key locations. The statues were visible representations of the authority of the new King. Part of the significance of man’s being made in the image of God is that in certain ways he reflects God’s attributes. God rules and judges and He has assigned these tasks to human institutions as well. Specifically to two spheres of human authority. ***The church and civil government.*** We call this kind of authority “derived” authority. In other words, it does not belong to man intrinsically. Rather God has *granted* it

so that human authority will carry out God's law on earth. While this is taught throughout the Scriptures, two passages summarize this truth:

1. Regarding the authority that God has given to **local church leadership**, Hebrews 13:17 states:

*Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. **They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.***

2. Regarding the authority that God has given to **civil government**, Paul writes in Romans 13:1:

*Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which **God has established**. The authorities that exist have been established by God.*

A question that frequently comes up regarding this authority that God delegates to humans is this—what if divine authority and human authority are in conflict with each other? What if man's authority is advocating a position that would cause a believer to violate God's authority? Certainly that can happen—and history provides us with sufficient examples. In those situations we must remember that *derived* authority is not *absolute* authority. So when confronted with the choice of obeying God's law or obeying man's law because the two were in conflict, Peter said in Acts 5:29: *We ought to obey God rather than man.*" I will have a little bit more to say about this near the end of the message.

But as a rule, God says obey the authorities over these respective spheres. In short, obey the law of the land and obey church leaders as they faithfully and carefully proclaim the Word of God to you. Why? ***Because God is a God of order.***

But that is not all. Our orderly...

II. God has established a "**due process**" for addressing problems and conflicts.

You are probably asking: Where is the phrase "due process" found in the Bible? Sounds like a phrase out of ***Law and Order*** or ***The People's Court*** or ***Court TV***? What does that have to do with the Bible? More than you probably realize. When you look closer at the Bible, you begin to see a process from the earliest of times in the history of God's people that was designed to deal with conflicts and problems in an orderly way.

- A. **This process was commanded to His people in the OT and (to this day) has influenced laws in much of modern Western society.**

Let me illustrate. In Deuteronomy 19:15, Moses states:

15 *“One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A **matter must be established** by the testimony of **two or three** witnesses.*

Moses lays down the principle that more than **one witness** was necessary **to convict a man of a crime** (cf. 17:6). This general principle was to act as a safeguard against a false witness who might bring an untruthful charge against a fellow Israelite because of a quarrel or out of some other wrong motive. By requiring more than one witness—at least **two or three**—greater accuracy and objectivity was assured.

In our own legal system, in part because of the influence of the Judeo-Christian ethic and in part due to God’s common grace, there has been a recognition that people can manipulate and misuse the judicial system. This has led to an insistence on a **due process** that seeks to provide justice for all. That is why “hearsay” or gossip is not considered “admissible evidence” in a court case.

And so our legal system has a place in resolving conflict. But it is only as strong and reliable as the people who participate in it and their own commitment to justice. So what do Christians do when they have conflicts with *each other*? Are we at the mercy of whatever judge, court or lawyer we can retain? Or do we have something *better*?

- B. This (due) process has been more fully defined **for** and empowered **in** the Church.

We don’t just have *common grace*, which is what God gives to unsaved people to keep them from disintegrating into chaos. We have *special grace* to help us deal with problems and conflict. The key passage for this is Matthew 18:15-20:

15 *“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16 But if he will not listen, **take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’** 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. 18 “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 “Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 **For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.**”*

Pastor Bob reviewed this passage three weeks ago so we don't need to look at it in depth. But I just want you to make a couple of important connections. Did you catch the “*two or three*” phrase? Sound familiar? It is an echo of Moses concern for a due process—but here Jesus is applying it to *the Church*. But notice. With the process there is a more detailed discussion. Now the witnesses are not just witnesses to an *event*—they are witnesses in the sense that they are investigating and verifying the accusation. There is careful attention given to an orderly procedure for dealing with conflict. And notice something else. There is a goal here that is much more apparent. It is not just *justice* in order to keep the *peace*. It is about parties being reconciled and restored. As you read this, you begin to get the sense that is something *greater* going on here than is evident in Deuteronomy. There is ***Gospel power*** at work in this text. We'll come back to that in a moment.

But before we do that, consider one more verse: I Timothy 5:19:

*Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is **brought by two or three witnesses.***

Again the same emphasis on a due process so as not to turn a difference with an elder into a vendetta. Neither is there any allowance for sweeping an elder's sin under the rug. There is too much at stake for that. Because God has *always* had a due process for resolving problems among His people!

Which brings us to the last principle—and the one found in our text we read for this morning in I Corinthians 6.

III. **God expects His church to adhere to His “due process.”**

- A. He is pleased when we pursue it.
- B. He is displeased when we ignore or violate it (I Corinthians 6:1-6).

There are four reasons for this that Paul cites:

1. Failure to follow Christ's “due process” shows a lack of *respect* for His divinely delegated authority to the Church. Paul writes in verse 1:

*I If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for **judgment instead of before the saints?***

God has delegated authority both to His church *and* to civil government. But when it comes to matters between Christians, the Church has ***primary*** jurisdiction. Of course if a matter involves activities that have broken man's laws, they obviously need to be

addressed in man's courts as well as God's court. But too often God's court (the local church) is being ignored or bypassed altogether. To relegate a case that belongs in God's court to man's lower court is to disrespect God's delegation of authority.

Illustration: I had someone very close to me who fall into a destructive lifestyle who lived in another state. When I called him and asked him why the Church was failing to act through loving discipline—he replied: “I know what you are talking about and I agree that the Scriptures plainly teach it. But we aren't going to pursue it because I have never seen it done by anyone else!” Sadly that situation ended up in man's court and the church split and the pastor lost his job within six months! One reason for this failure to help its own members solve problems is that many churches have little confidence in what the Scriptures so plainly teach. Which leads us to the second reason why our Lord is displeased...

2. Failure to follow Christ's “due process” exposes a shallow understanding of our *identity* and resources in Christ in vs. 2-4.

Paul says: Christians—*don't you know who you are?* You are future rulers and judges in God's kingdom. You will be judging the world. Jesus told the “*overcomers*” at the church in Thyatira: “*To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations!*” In fact, after you are completely restored into the image of Christ, you will be judging *angels!*!

Paul's argument continues: If God is in the process of growing you and preparing you for that sort of task—*don't you think you can handle some relatively trivial stuff here and now?*

The bottom line is that we have so much more than the world. What do two Christians have when they go to man's court? What does a Christian *couple* have when they go to divorce court without first seeking help in God's court? You will have a judge and a system that is massively overloaded. You will have lawyers who are trained to defend their client at all costs and who may be skilled in tactics of manipulation, revenge and airing dirty laundry. Few of them know little of the reconciling power of the Gospel. But in God's court—if *the church will just be the church*—you have the Gospel, you have the Holy Spirit, you have people who love you and want to see you get gain peace and joy in pursuing your role as God's kind of person. Paul's point is why would you settle for so little when you have so much to gain for Christ!

But you also have something to lose as well...

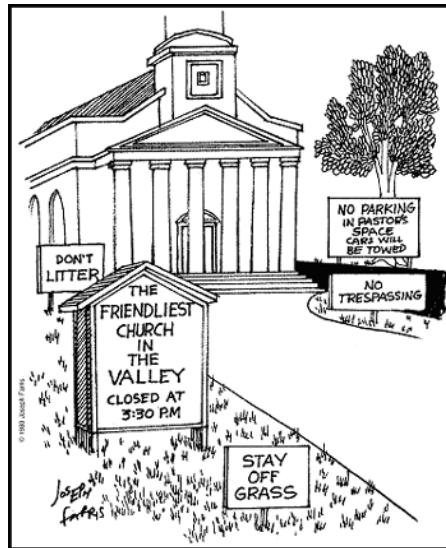
3. Failure to follow Christ's "due process" mocks our *purpose* statement (vs. 5).

In verse 5, Paul uses some real "tongue in cheek":

5 I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?

If you recall earlier in this book in chapters 1-2, Paul noted how the Corinthians had a craving to be known and recognized for their great wisdom. In fact, I think that if you would have driven by the Church at Corinthian, you would have seen on their church sign a statement that looked something like this: "Your search for wisdom ends here."

You know—you have to be careful about what you put on a church sign.



The Corinthian mission statement was something like: ***Boldly taking wisdom where no man has gone before.*** But they had a problem, Houston. They were a couple of fortune cookies short of a Chinese dinner. Their purpose statement notwithstanding—they looked more like *Dumb and Dumber!* And Paul sees the irony of it all. If you guys think you have so much wisdom, why don't you scrounge just a little of it together and start working on problems in *your own court!* How many times have we allowed ourselves to be mocked by the failure to live up to our own Gospel message?!

But if it is ironic to be mocked by your own Mission Statement, there is something that is outright tragic...

4. Failure to follow Christ's "due process" destroys our *witness* before the world (vs. 6).

6 But instead, one brother goes to law against another—and this in front of unbelievers!

For the Corinthians to take each other to man's court threatened to destroy the very message for which they supposedly existed. When you consider the fact that the legal system of Corinth was located in the center of the city in a very open and public place known as the Bema Seat, you begin to realize just how foolish and destructive their wisdom was.

Years later a Roman Emperor known as Julian the Apostate, a man who had grown up around Christianity—but eventually abandoned it because he failed to see it lived out—made this sad observation:

“...having found by experience that no wild beasts are so hostile to men as are most Christians to one another.”

Brothers and sisters. God wants and is worthy of Order in His Court—the Church of Jesus Christ. I am not saying that there is never a time to go to man's court. I am not even saying that there is never a time that is ever appropriate to deal with a professing brother in man's court—such as if you are divorced against your will—or if you have biblical grounds to dissolve a marriage because of ongoing marital unfaithfulness. I am saying that if you are dealing with a Christian, you must **first** exhaust all remedies in God's court. If you do—and there the other is shown to be sinning and unwilling to repent, because at that point they are to be treated as a lost person—there may be some instances where you may find it necessary to go to man's court. But only after you have followed God's order.

Too many ignore God's order. And too many churches ignore their duty to be reconcilers. But when we do—God is ready to show Himself to be a bigger Savior than we are sinners.

Illustration: Couple who had marital problems—but no basis for divorce. Wife: I am getting a divorce on Monday. Went with a church leader to the house on Friday. Listened to her intention. And gently told her—if you go to man's court on Monday, we are going to God's Court the next Sunday. She backed off—though a bit angry. [Read her letter!]

Invitation: Don't know Christ? You aren't ready to meet the **Judge of all the earth!** Let me give you a name of a good attorney. He has never lost a case before the Judge. His name is Jesus! You can retain Him today—and forever if you will only renounce confidence in your own efforts to save yourself, repent of your sin, and put your full trust in Him!