

## HOW TO HANDLE DISPUTES AMONG CHRISTIANS

*6 If any of you has a dispute with his neighbor, does he dare to bring the matter before the unrighteous for settlement, and not before the saints? <sup>2</sup>Or do you not know that the saints shall judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you not competent to judge the most trivial cases? <sup>3</sup>Do you not realize that we will judge angels? [This being so,] should we not much more be [competent to] judge cases pertaining to everyday life? <sup>4</sup>Now then, if you must judge cases pertaining to everyday affairs, appoint as judges those men for whom the church has no respect. <sup>5</sup>I say this to make you ashamed. Is this the case, that there is not [even] one wise man among you who is able to decide [a dispute] between brothers; <sup>6</sup>but [one] brother must go to court [against another] brother—and this before unbelievers? <sup>7</sup>Actually, the fact that you have lawsuits against one another is already a defect\* in you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be cheated? <sup>8</sup>On the contrary, you yourselves are doing wrong and cheating, and [you are doing these things] to your brothers. <sup>9</sup>Do you not realize that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor those who practice homosexuality, <sup>10</sup>nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>11</sup>And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor. 6:1-11)*

\*The American Standard Version gives the translation, “defect,” for the Greek word, ἑστῆμα. Given the Corinthians’ propensity to consider themselves as having already achieved spiritual perfection (note 4:8), the translation, “defect,” does seem to be most fitting.

### **Introduction**

Suppose you overhear two young brothers carrying on a heated argument. They come spilling out of the front door of their house, tumbling into the street, accusing each other of wrongdoing and vehemently claiming their rights. They capture your attention; you pause to listen more carefully. What is this argument all about? From the intensity of their involvement it surely must center on some weighty matter of great importance.

As you continue to listen in to this heated argument, to your amazement, you discover that the two boys are squabbling over nothing more than some insignificant broken toy! You catch a glimpse of this “treasure” that is the center of the controversy, the “treasure” they are pulling back and forth between them, and quite accurately you evaluate it as nothing more than a piece of junk! As a matter of fact, is it not the very toy you yourself threw into the garbage this morning because these two little boys—your sons—had discarded it long ago?

If you came upon such a situation, what would you think? What would you do? In this sixth chapter of 1 Corinthians the Apostle Paul tells us that disputes between Christians over worldly issues and things are very much comparable to the scenario

just described involving the two young brothers. Scripture tells us that disputes among Christians are an indication of spiritual defect; but when such disputes occur, they should be handled in a godly manner. Let us now consider some biblical guidelines for handling disputes among fellow Christians that may be gleaned from this present passage of Scripture.

## I. Is This an Issue Worth Disputing? (6:2-7)

In verse 2 the Apostle Paul reminds these Corinthian Christians—actually informing them of something they should have known, *“the saints shall judge the world.”* We may also take note of Psalm 149:6-9,

*May the praises of God be in their mouths, and a double-edged sword in their hands; <sup>7</sup>to inflict vengeance upon the nations, and punishment on the peoples; <sup>8</sup>to bind their kings with fetters, and their nobles with shackles of iron; <sup>9</sup>to carry out the sentence of judgment written against them. This is the honor given to all his saints. Praise Jehovah. (Psl. 149:6-9)*

Paul finds it incredible that these Christians who will one day join Christ in judging the world are incapable of judging and settling the mundane disputes pertaining to the things of this world. Note: Paul defines the Corinthians’ disputes as being “trivial,” (which they certainly are when viewed from the standpoint of the final judgment;) although the Corinthians themselves no doubt viewed their disputes as involving matters of great importance: weighty matters of personal rights, personal possessions, and personal offenses that they may have suffered.

In verse 3, to help us gain a better and more realistic perspective, Paul reminds us that we shall *“judge angels.”* The apostle reminds us of our participation with Christ in the final judgment in order to encourage us to recognize that in Christ we have the competence to handle these lesser issues that belong to this present life; as the Apostle James counsels, *“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him”* (Jas. 1:5.) Furthermore, the Apostle Paul desires to give us a proper perspective on how insignificant our present disputes are in comparison to the great issues to be decided at the final judgment. Many times the solution to our present disputes lies in the refocusing of our perspective; once again, may we consider the Apostle James and the admonition he gives the church:

*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Do they not come from your desires that battle within you? <sup>2</sup>You want something but do not get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. <sup>3</sup>When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. ...<sup>10</sup>Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. (Jas. 4:1-3,10)*

Resorting to a bit of sarcasm, Paul counsels the Corinthian Christians, If you have disputes pertaining to everyday affairs, *“appoint as judges those men for whom the church has no respect”* (vs. 4.) The apostle suggests that when the members of Christ’s church have a dispute over worldly matters, (personal possessions, personal rights, etc.), they should select a man for whom they have no respect, (perhaps a drunken bum who lives in the gutter,) and appoint him to be the judge and arbitrator—such a man would make a fit judge to handle such trivial and worthless disputes! The point being made is this: In the light of eternity and the kingdom of God and the final judgment, the disputes involving the things of this world are so insignificant that they should not become major divisive issues between Christians.

The Corinthians held a very high evaluation of themselves and their spiritual status. In 1 Corinthians 4:8, Paul expressed the sentiment that was the Corinthians’ personal view of themselves, namely, that they had already attained to the supreme heights of spiritual life and experience: *“You have already been filled, you have already become rich, you have come to reign without us. Indeed, I wish that you did reign, so that we also might reign with you.”* But contrary to the Corinthians’ personal evaluation of themselves, the Apostle Paul points out a glaring spiritual defect, namely, the fact that they have lawsuits and personal disputes with one another (vs. 7.)

If we really have attained to full spiritual maturity, we would imitate the mind and attitude of Christ our Savior. Like Christ, we should endure wrongs and mistreatment with a spirit of forgiveness and confidence in God, note how the Apostle Peter describes the Lord’s response to the wrongs He suffered:

*... Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow ... <sup>22</sup>He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. <sup>23</sup>When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself [or, his cause] to the one who judges justly. (1 Pet. 2:21-23)*

By means of several striking examples, our Lord, in His Sermon on the Mount, emphasizes the spirit of kindness, forbearance, and even self-sacrifice that should characterize us as His disciples, even as it was a characteristic of the Savior Himself:

*You have heard that it was said, Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. <sup>39</sup>But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. <sup>40</sup>And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. <sup>41</sup>If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. <sup>42</sup>Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. (Matt. 5:38-42)*

When you find yourself in a dispute with a fellow Christian, ask yourself: Is this an issue worth disputing? Do I have the right perspective, rightly evaluating the present issues of this world in the light of eternity and the great issues of the kingdom of God? Am I exhibiting the mind of Christ, the mind and attitude of forgiveness, forbearance, self-giving and self-sacrificing love?

## II. To What Extent am I at Fault? (6:8-11)

In verse 7 the apostle raises the question, Why are you not simply enduring the wrong being perpetrated against you? In other words, Why are you not following the example of Christ your Savior?

His questions—intended to stimulate self-evaluation, conviction, and a truly Christian perspective—now give way to charges against these Christians: You yourselves are cheating and doing wrong to your own Christian brothers (vs. 8.) Far from imitating the example of Christ, these Christian people were doing the exact opposite. Not only were they unwilling to endure any wrong perpetrated against themselves; they were committing acts of wrongdoing against their brothers!

In order to maintain the unity and promote the well-being of Christ's church, we must be willing to endure and forgive offenses, as Paul exhorts the church in Colossians 3:12-14,

*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. <sup>13</sup>Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. <sup>14</sup>And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Col. 3:12-14)*

But not only must we be willing to endure and forgive offenses, we must refrain from doing wrong to others; as our Lord Jesus instructs us: *"in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets"* (Matt. 7:12.) The Apostle Paul exhorts the church: *"Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification"* (Rom. 14:19.)

Having mentioned the wrongdoing being committed within the church, even against fellow believers, the Apostle Paul issues this stern warning:

*Do you not realize that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor those who practice homosexuality, <sup>10</sup>nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor. 6:9-10)*

We must not be deceived; the fact is that those who continue to engage in sinful conduct shall not inherit the kingdom of God. A Christian profession apart from a Christian lifestyle is not a true profession of faith and it must not be allowed to become a fatal deception. In Luke 6:46 our Lord Jesus asks the penetrating question, *“Why do you call me, Lord, Lord, but do not do what I say?”* In His Sermon on the Mount our Lord warns:

*Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup>Many will say to me on that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles? <sup>23</sup>Then I will tell them plainly, I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers! (Matt. 7:21-23)*

Note that in the apostle’s warning, issued in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, coupled with such “notorious” sins as immorality and perversity, are such sins as thievery, greed, slander, and swindling.

Following the sober reminder that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God, comes the reminder that when we, by faith, have entered into Christ, we have left the old sinful life behind: *“And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God”* (vs. 11.) When we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ we become united to Him and enter into His spiritual life of holiness. By the grace of God, that holiness must become increasingly evident in the life we now live in the body in this present world—our former sins should become an anomaly to our new Christian life, they must not remain the normal pattern for our life, note 1 Peter 4:2, *“since Christ suffered in the flesh, also fortify yourselves with the same attitude, because he who suffered in the flesh is done with sin. <sup>2</sup>As a result, he does not live the remainder of his [earthly] life for evil human desires, but for the will of God.”*

When you find yourself in a dispute with a fellow Christian, ask yourself, To what extent am I at fault? Have I slipped back into the old sinful lifestyle that is an intolerable contradiction to my new Christian identity? Do I need to honestly admit and then repent of wrongdoing? Have I joined the Psalmist in praying, *“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me, and know my thoughts. <sup>24</sup>See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting”* (Psl. 139:23-24.)

### **III. What Christian Brother Can Help Us Work This Out? (6:1-6)**

The Corinthian Christians, being unwilling or unable by themselves to resolve their disputes, were taking each other to court (vs. 1.) The Apostle Paul is shocked that these Christians would dare to do such a thing: *“If any of you has a dispute with his neighbor [here meaning a fellow Christian], does he dare to*

*bring the matter before the unrighteous* [i.e.; the unbelieving civil authorities] *for settlement, and not before the saints?*

The apostle's point is this: It is disgraceful for Christians to appeal to the world to settle their disputes, rather than look to fellow Christians for help when needed. It is a dishonor to Christ that we who shall join with Him in the final judgment of the world (vs. 2) should appeal to the world to settle our disputes. It is a dishonor to Christ for us not to employ the spiritual resources we possess, (the Word of God, prayer, the person of the Holy Spirit, fellow Christians,) in settling our disputes.

In verse 4 Paul had sarcastically instructed these Christians to appoint a man of no repute to serve as their arbitrator and judge. He was not serious, (note verse 5a;) he was merely seeking to get the Corinthians to see the trivial nature of their disputes in the light of the truly great issues of the final judgment. But now in verse 5b he does recommend that the disputing Christians seek out from among themselves (i.e.; from within the church) *"a wise man ... who is able to decide [a dispute] between brothers."*

There are times when Christians need the ministry of fellow Christians; occasionally, the settling of personal disputes is such a time, as was the case in the church at Philippi, to whom Paul writes: *"I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord. <sup>3</sup>Indeed, I ask you, Syzygus—[loyal yoke fellow]—to help these women who labored with me for the gospel"* (Phil. 4:2-3a.) The Lord Jesus gives the following instructions to His church with regard to the settling of disputes and the handling of offenses:

*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. <sup>16</sup>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." <sup>17</sup>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. (Matt. 18:15-17)*

On such occasions we are counseled to seek the help of a wise Christian man: a Christian brother (or sister) who knows the Scriptures, who is a man or woman of prayer, who has the right spiritual perspective, focused on the kingdom of God rather than on the things of this present world, who will seek to render an impartial, biblical decision. We should seek out a fellow Christian who exhibits the wisdom described by the Apostle James:

*Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom ... <sup>17</sup> ... the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. (Jas. 3:13,17)*

When you find yourself in a dispute with a fellow Christian, ask yourself, What Christian brother (or sister) can help us to work this out? Rather than brother against brother going to court before the civil magistrates of the world; when necessary, brother with brother should together seek out a fellow Christian whom they respect to assist them in gaining reconciliation.

## **Conclusion**

If we seek to live Christ-like lives and follow our Lord's instruction given in Matthew 7:12 (*"in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets,"*) disputes between fellow Christians should not occur. But when and if they do arise, as members of Christ's body, we must handle disputes in the way our Lord prescribes and outlines for us by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 6.