

LIVING OUT THE GOSPEL IN COMMUNITY

SERIES: UNDER THE CROSS



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1 Corinthians 6:1-11
Seventh Message
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1 Corinthians 6:1-11

For the past several Halloweens, my kids have tried to get me to dress up with them, but I have always turned them down—until this year. This year, for Halloween, we have a Westman family costume themed after *The Princess Bride*. Peyton, my 7-year-old, has the distinct privilege of being Inigo Montoya, and he has been working to perfect one of the most well-known movie lines of all time: “My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.”

If you are not familiar with *The Princess Bride*, Inigo Montoya is a man on a quest for revenge. As a young boy, his father was killed by a six-fingered man. Ever since, Inigo has dedicated his life to perfecting his skill with a sword so that one day he can find this six-fingered man and exact his revenge

While Inigo Montoya’s lifelong quest for vengeance might be a bit of an extreme example, it does tap into something that lives within each one of us—the desire that we have to be treated rightly, justly, and fairly, and the extent that we will go to to make sure that happens.

While not many of us will have the experience of Inigo Montoya, we all have the experience of being mistreated, wronged, or taken advantage of in some way. And the worst part is that sometimes, this happens to us by others in the church—by our own brothers and sisters in Christ.

Community is beautiful but also messy because community is made up of people, and people are always messy.

So, how do we live lives shaped by the gospel in a community that will always fall short of our ideal? How do we live lives shaped by the gospel in a community where we know that, eventually, somebody will do something to hurt us?

These are the questions that we will look at today because these are the questions that Paul addresses in our text for today: 1 Corinthians 6:1-11. We are working

our way through 1 Corinthians, and we have already seen that the community in this church was pretty messed up. There was division and disunity all over the place. Last week, we saw that there was sexual sin in the church that was being unaddressed.

As the letter goes on, we read about other issues, including the one that we will look at today, where an interpersonal conflict in the church has escalated to the point where one person is taking another person to court.

Paul is upset at how this situation is handled, and he has some strong words to address what’s going on.

Seeing ourselves as saints

1 Corinthians 6:1-3:

When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? ² Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? ³ Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!

It is clear here that Paul has been informed about a particular situation taking place in the church in Corinth. We don’t know all of the details of the situation, but here is what we can see. Someone in the church has wronged someone else. The person who has been wronged has sued the person who wronged them, taking them to court. And this court is not just some counsel or committee within the church. This is the court of Corinth—the court of the land.

We don’t know the nature of the offense, but Paul does say that it was *trivial*. It was a minor incident. Later in the passage, there is language used that suggests that the person who was wronged was taken advantage of in some way, likely something with financial implications. Think something like a tenant who won’t pay their rent or a car accident where the at-fault party won’t

pay, or something like that. In other words, this is not a criminal case. No crime has been committed. As far as we can tell, this is a civil case in which one person is suing another person for damages, pain and suffering, or something similar.

This is important to clarify because some people have used this passage as justification to deal with major criminal offenses, most notably cases of sexual abuse, in the church *rather than reporting them to the police* and letting the legal system enact justice. Let's be clear: Paul does not condone the covering up of abuse within the church. In fact, that kind of behavior is much closer to the behavior that Paul is condemning in chapter 5 (where the church is allowing sexual immorality to go unaddressed within the church).

Here, Paul is not talking about covering up a major criminal case by handling it in the church. Instead, as the passage goes on, we will see that Paul is upset about two things. First, he is upset that such a minor case has gone to court at all instead of being worked out in relationship. Second, he is upset this infighting in the church has been put on display for the world, thereby damaging the reputation of Jesus in the eyes of the world. In both cases, the Corinthians are acting in ways that are deeply at odds with their identity in Christ, their identity as the people of God. And that is the main issue that Paul is trying to address here.

In verse 1, Paul refers to the Corinthian believers as "saints." This is not the first time that he has used this language. Back at the very beginning of the letter, in 1 Corinthians 1:2, Paul says this: "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call up the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

A major theme of the letter, which becomes the focus of our passage today, is that *the identity of the people of God is meant to shape the behavior of the people of God*. The identity of the people of God is meant to shape the behavior of the people of God. And from the beginning of the letter and into our passage in chapter 6, Paul wants us to know this about ourselves: *we are saints*. As those who are in Christ, we are saints.

What is a saint? The word translated as saints is the Greek word *hagios* or holy ones. It carries the idea of being set apart, consecrated, dedicated to God. When used as a verb, it means "to sanctify" or "to make holy." Biblically speaking, saints are not a special level of Christians. Saints are not those who are especially holy

or, righteous or godly. No, we all are saints, all of us who believe in Jesus. That is *who we are*.

Now, the problem is that our behavior does not always match up with our identity. We don't always live as if we are saints.

A friend of mine who has kids in high school has created a helpful rule for his kids to keep in mind when making decisions. He calls it the Idiot Rule. The idiot rule is very simple. It goes like this: Before doing something, ask yourself, "Would an idiot do this?" If the answer is yes, don't do it! Because you are not an idiot.

Paul's test here is the converse of the Idiot Rule. We might call it the Saint Rule. Before doing something, ask yourself, "Would a saint do this? Would a *holy one* do this?" If not, don't do it, because that is what you are. You are a saint. Let that identity shape your behavior.

Paul points to their identity as saints in the present. But he also looks to their identity in the future, specifically their role in the judgment of the last days. On that day, Paul says, they will judge both the people of the world and the angels.

Scripture says in many places that we, as the people of God, will rule with Christ in the new heavens and new earth. Indeed, we were created to be co-rulers, co-regents, with God over creation. Paul says that part of this act of ruling will also include a role as judge in the final judgment. As those who have been united with Christ, we will actually serve as judges with Christ over both the people of the world and even the angels. This is remarkable!

If one day we are going to participate in the judgment of the final days, are we not capable of resolving the trivial disagreements we have with one another here on earth? If we lack the wisdom and the grace to settle the small things among ourselves, what makes us think that we will be fit to serve as judges of the eternal destiny of humans and angels?

Paul's point here is simple: Our present identity as saints and our future identity as those who will judge the world mean that we ought to possess the wisdom and grace to work out our disagreements with one another in loving relationships rather than in court.

Acting as witnesses

As Paul continues, he turns from our future role as judges over the world to our present role as witnesses to the world. We see this in verses 4-6.

1 Corinthians 6:4-6:

So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? ⁵ I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, ⁶ but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers?

First-century Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures were both very much honor-shame cultures. In these cultures, your reputation was everything. To be treated with honor was the ultimate reward, but to be viewed with shame was the ultimate punishment. Here, Paul says to the Corinthians, “Shame on you. Shame on you.” Why? Why does Paul cast shame on them? Because they have tarnished the reputation of Christ. As they fight with one another in the public eye, they tarnish the reputation of Christ.

Friends, we can never forget that we live our lives in front of a watching world. As witnesses of Christ, it is not what we say with our words that speaks the loudest but the way that we live our lives. And, when we act with selfishness and greed, when we put our comfort above the wellbeing of others, when we act vindictively towards one another, the world is watching. And what we are showing them in those moments is that the love of Christ has been ineffectual in our lives—that the grace God has shown us has not permeated our character in such a way that it pours out to those around them. In those times, nothing in our actions would suggest that we are, in fact, saints, set apart, dedicated to God in any way. We are acting just like the world around us. In so doing, we empty the cross of its power and damage the reputation of Christ. We must remember that how we conduct ourselves in relationship with one another impacts our witness to a watching world.

But, it’s not just the witness of the Corinthians church that Paul is concerned with; he is also distraught that this case came to exist at all. We see this in what he says next in verses 7-8.

1 Corinthians 6:7-8:

To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? ⁸ But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers!

There is a Mexican restaurant near my house that is a go-to for a quick meal on a busy night for our family. It’s nothing fancy, but everyone leaves happy every time except when we order delivery. There have been a number of times that we have ordered food from this restaurant to be delivered to our house, and without fail, the order is messed up. Sometimes, it’s something small, sometimes something big, and always something frustrating

At this point, we have learned our lesson and just pick up the food ourselves. But before we started doing that, we had several times where we were missing food, had to report the error, get a refund, and fill in dinner with something from the fridge.

One time, however, our account got flagged because we had reported too many missing items in some period of time, and the company refused to refund the missing items from this order. Being short one quesadilla is bad enough, especially when it means you have to cook something else for your kids. But then to pay for food that we never even got—so frustrating! It might only be \$4 worth of food, but it makes me want to fight for what’s mine.

But then I hear these words from Paul, “Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?”

We all have a tendency to fight for what is ours. When we have been wronged, something in us wants to fight back to right the wrong, to get justice or maybe even revenge. And I’m not just talking about a case of missing guacamole, but things that are much more serious. A friend who betrays us. Someone who intentionally cheats us. A colleague who uses us to get what they want. When we find ourselves in those situations, there is a little bit of Inigo Montoya in us that says, “You killed my father. Prepare to die.”

And then we have the words of Paul, echoing the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, “Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded.” This is a clear call to an ethic of non-retaliation, a call to allow myself to be wronged. To be cheated. To be taken

advantage of. And to turn the other cheek. Not to fight back, not to demand my rights. Not to make sure that I get what I deserve. But to accept the wrongdoing. The mistreatment. The small act of injustice.

Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not be defrauded? Is that not the way of our Savior?

As Jesus walked to the cross, he was mocked, beaten, and shamed, yet he opened not his mouth. Rather, like a lamb being led to the slaughter, he was silent.

As Jesus hung on the cross, he could have called down the very armies of heaven to put an end to what, without a doubt, was about to become the greatest injustice of all time—the only innocent man who ever lived being murdered by those he came to save and then bearing the weight of the sins of the world on his shoulders. Willingly. Intentionally. Giving up his rights and his status. Suffering wrongdoing. For us. Out of love for us. Accomplishing for us on that cross what we could not do for ourselves.

You see, when we refuse to accept wrongdoing, even from our own sisters and brothers in Christ, we find ourselves living out of line with the gospel itself. We find ourselves living lives that are contrary to the gospel itself.

This is why Paul is so upset. So when we live lives of greed and self-love rather than the self-giving love of Christ, we demonstrate that the truth of the gospel has not worked its way into our hearts to such a degree that the love of Christ pours out of us and onto those around us. But when we are willing to accept wrongdoing without retaliation, we demonstrate the fruit of a life that is deeply embedded in the grace of God.

And that is what it looks like to live out the gospel in community. By the grace of God, may we live lives like this.

Reminding ourselves of who we are in Christ

Before Paul moves on to the next issue he wants to address, he closes out this section with some of the most startling and most comforting words of the whole letter. These words are meant to bring us back to where we started today, with a reminder that our identity is meant to shape our behavior.

Let's look at the startling words first.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality,¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

With these startling words, Paul wants us to recognize that certain behaviors, if they characterize our lives, ought to make us question whether we are really part of the kingdom of God.

And this list, I think, is not meant to be an exhaustive list but more of a representative sample. Likely, Paul is calling out some things that he knows are taking place in Corinth and even among the Corinthians believers. The point, however, is less about these specific sins and is a bit more broad. He is saying, if you think you are a part of the kingdom of God—a kingdom that is present in part now and will include all of creation when Jesus returns—you must ask yourself, Am I living my life under the rule and reign of God? Am I bowing my knee to Jesus my king?

Not, Am I perfect and sinless? In no way is Paul suggesting that we could earn our way into the kingdom of God through our works. Rather, he is drawing attention to what the kingdom of God is. The kingdom of God is the place where God reigns, where God rules. And to be a part of the kingdom of God is to submit your life to the loving rule and reign of God—both in this life and in the next.

So the question for us in this life is, Are you living your life in submission to Jesus your king?

If the answer is no, we have to ask ourselves why we think we will bow our knees to Jesus, our king when he comes back again.

We have to ask ourselves, What evidence is there in my life that demonstrates I have submitted my life to Christ, bowed down at his feet, said my life is not about me but it about you, King Jesus? Do my actions tell the same story as my words? That's an important question for us to ask.

But just as soon as Paul invites us to ask that question, he reminds us of who we are in Christ. He brings us back to our identity.

1 Corinthians 6:11:

And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the LORD Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Paul is reminding us: You are not who you used to be. Something happened in your life. And this is true of all of us who have believed in Jesus. There is a moment—either a specific moment or a process that unfolded over some length of time—but there is a moment when you placed your trust in Jesus and encountered the grace of God. And here is what happened in that moment:

You were washed. Cleansed. The stain of your sin was washed clean by the blood of Christ. That happened to you.

You were sanctified. The root of this word is the same at the word “saint” that we look at in verse 1. You were made holy. You were made pure. You were dedicated to God. That happened to you.

You were justified. Declared innocent in the sight of God because of what Jesus did for you. That happened to you.

And yes, sin still lives in your body. Yes, there is still a healing process, a refining process that needs to happen. That’s why we are all still messy.

But make no mistake: If you have placed your faith in Jesus, you are not the same person you used to be. You have been united with Christ. You have been filled with his Spirit. You have been cleansed. You have been made holy. And you have been declared righteous. That is who you are.

And that is the gospel. Now, let’s go live that in relationship with one another.

Conclusion

James Clear, the author of the book *Atomic Habits*, makes this observation about the relationship between our behavior and our identity. He says:

*Your current behaviors are simply a reflection of your current identity. What you do now is a mirror image of the type of person you believe you are (either consciously or subconsciously). To change your behavior for good, you need to start believing new things about yourself.*¹

James Clear offers a helpful insight into the process of behavior change, and I think the Apostle Paul would agree with him with one small change. To change our behavior for good, we don’t just need to start believing new things about ourselves; we must start believing *true* things about ourselves. We don’t need just to identify who we want to be; we must recognize who God says that we are. We don’t just pick an identity that is appealing to us; we adopt the identity that God has given us.

Here is the takeaway: *Root yourself in Christ*—You have been washed. You have been sanctified. You have been justified. This is what Christ and the Spirit have done for you. Root yourself in this! And open yourself up to the ongoing power of the Spirit so that this truth from your core might flow out into your life.

When we do this, we will find a way to live at peace with one another, accepting wrongdoing with grace and responding to one another with love.

Endnotes

1. James Clear, “*Identity-Based Habits: How to Actually Stick to Your Goals This Year*,” jamesclear.com, accessed 10/25/24, <https://jamesclear.com/identity-based-habits>.