

Are We Defeating Ourselves?

Scripture Text: 1 Corinthians 6:1–11

Introduction

This message was going to be a different one. The essence of it is still the same, but I wanted to focus on how we should handle disagreements and conflicts. We addressed this a couple of weeks ago when we discovered that our conflicts with one another stem from our own selfish desires (James 4:1-10). What we selfishly want becomes more important than what God wants or what others want and that produces conflict. Building on that concept, I would like to look at what we need to do to pursue peace with one another. As we learned last week, we are in a very real fight against spiritual forces. Sometimes, though, we can fight the wrong people or for the wrong things. For instance, is it really worth fighting for the color of the carpet, or the placement of the pulpit, or the style of music being used for worship? Are those hills worth dying on? We have a much more important mission to fulfill and it takes all of us working together.

A church is a group of people who are brought together by the blood of Jesus Christ. A church is also a community that God is building. God desires for His community to draw closer to Him, to draw closer to each other, and to strengthen and encourage one another as they wait for Jesus to return. A church ought to stir up one another to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24). But, we know that all is not calm and peaceful all of the time. There are waves on the sea and things to be addressed from time to time. The world is in conflict and needs peacemakers. Many churches are in conflict and are also in need of peacemakers. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we should want to follow Him, the Prince of Peace. God sent His Son to make peace with the world. God desires His children to pursue peace with one another and with the world. Jesus told us how important peacemakers are. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said the following:

Matthew 5:9 *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*

So, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we ought to follow the Prince of Peace and do all that we can do to make peace with each other. But, does that really happen?

How We Handle Conflict Matters

We sometimes get into very serious conflict with one another that leads to very serious consequences for the whole community. This was certainly true for the church in Corinth. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he had heard not only of disunity in the Corinthian church but also of serious cases of sexual misconduct (5:1–13, 6:12–20), and of members in the church taking other members to court (6:1–11). Some of the church members had wronged each other. Instead of addressing those problems within the church, at least one person took another member before the local magistrates. For our litigation laden and "I'll sue you" culture, this might not seem so strange; however, it is a problem for people who call themselves the church and are supposed to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Look at the following verses.

1 Corinthians 6:1–4 ¹ *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!* ⁴ *So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church?*

Although some believe that Paul was prohibiting Christians from ever going to court against another Christian, this is probably not the case. Paul was not suggesting that there was never a time to go to the civil courts. Even he had gone to the Roman courts and had appealed to Caesar (Acts 25:8-12). He also affirmed that God places the civilian authorities over us for our good (Romans 13:1-5). In this letter, Paul seems to have addressed disputes related to property or money, rather than criminal cases. Criminal cases fall under the jurisdiction of the state, which God has told us to obey. Therefore, the specific example Paul mentioned in this letter should not apply in every situation. Whatever the situation, disputes between believers need to be handled carefully and wisely. Wherever possible, problems involving two or more members of the same church should be resolved under the authority of the church and with the counsel of spiritually mature Christians who can give objective, biblical advice.

Our priorities tend to be warped toward the values of this age rather than of the age to come. We tend to get so wrapped up in what is going on now that we do not consider the greater, more important matter of what is to come. In some circumstances, to go to the courts of this world is to ask those who have absolutely no standing within the Church to make a judgement on a church. Paul pointed out the absurdity with us going to the civil courts to resolve disputes between members of the church. Earlier, Paul mentioned that a church does not judge those outside (1 Corinthians 5:12-13), but judges those inside, meaning, those who are members of the church. If we do not judge those outside the church, unbelievers, then we should not go to them with inside affairs. In fact, the people of God will participate in some way with Christ in the final day of judgment. The matters of dispute in this present life are trivial compared to God's judgement of the world. The church should be handling its own disputes.

Be Careful What You Communicate

What does it tell the world when the people of God are not at peace with one another? What does it say to an unbelieving world that the people who say they follow the Prince of Peace are not at peace with one another? Does that defeat any good we do? Does that contradict the very message we want to convey to others? To go to the courts of this world reveals something about us. It shows that we cannot agree on something. It also shows that we cannot resolve a dispute by ourselves. It also shows that we do not have any peacemakers among us. Paul wrote that this was a shame to us.

1 Corinthians 6:5–6 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?*

It was shameful for the church to not be at peace with one another. Paul was saying, “Shame on you! Surely there is at least one wise person in your fellowship who can settle a dispute between fellow members.” For a people who claimed to be wise (1 Corinthians 3:18; 4:10), they were not acting very wise. A trial between two church members before a pagan court was no innocent matter. It revealed how much they lacked Christian wisdom and how poorly they revealed Christ. The church was airing its dirty laundry to an unbelieving world. Not only does this misrepresent who the people of God are, but it does so in the presence of unbelievers, the very people to whom the Church should be different and the very people who need to hear and see the gospel. Why would an unbelieving world want to know Jesus or be a part of His Church if we act like the rest of the world? Consider this, do you think about the things you say about the Church or your church family when you are among non-believers? Do you consider how others will view you, the Church, or Jesus Christ when you air the conflicts and disputes within a church to those outside the Church. Paul said we defeat ourselves by going to the worldly courts to judge disputes between church members. Look at the next verses.

1 Corinthians 6:7–8 ⁷ *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 joke about who is the true winner in a legal dispute. Is it the plaintiff? Is it the defendant? It is actually neither. Only the lawyer is a winner. In a legal dispute between church members, neither member wins. The Church loses. We are already *defeated* when we take our matters to the civil courts. It tells the world that the people of peace cannot be at peace with one another. Rather than going to court, Paul suggested an alternative, but it is one that most of us do not want. Paul asked, “Why not rather be defrauded?” Why not rather endure personal loss. This is a concept we see throughout scripture. We should not return evil for evil (1 Thessalonians 5:15; Romans 12:17-20). Jesus told us to suffer wrong from others by turning the other cheek, giving our cloak, and going the extra mile for those who wrong us (Matthew 5:38-41). This is not to say that Paul only focused on letting people run all over us. In verse eight, he pointed out that they wrong and defraud one another, when they should be loving and helping each other. Such behavior is not only shameful but simply cannot be tolerated in a Christian community. So, not only should we not go to the civil courts to resolve our disputes, we should not be wronging one another in the first place. This leads to the next point.

Act Like People of Peace (Be the Church)

The Corinthians were acting like unbelievers rather than like the sanctified, holy people of God that God had called them to be. That is not a problem unique to the church in Corinth. Many “Christians” treat their salvation like a golden ticket to heaven with little to no thought about the implications of it. What implications are they, you might ask? God did not rescue you out of a prison of sin and death and bring you into His holy family for you to remain like this depraved world. If you accepted Christ, God saved you to become like His Son, Jesus. We should be like Him. Look at the next few verses.

1 Corinthians 6:9–11 ⁹ *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. 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.*

There is a lot we could say about those verses, but there is one thing I would like to mention. Paul listed many sins in those verses. The consequence of doing any one of them is eternal separation from God. We have a habit, though, of picking a “favorite sin” from a list. I do not mean favorite as the one we like to commit ourselves, but the one we like to comment and demonize more than others. One thing God’s Word makes perfectly clear is that every one of us is a sinner. Every one of us has broken God’s law. Every one of us has done many things to warrant eternity in hell. You may not have the same sin as someone else, you may not even see your specific sin or sins in this list, but you do sin, because you are a sinner. The good news of the gospel is that is not the end of the story. There is more. When we repent of our sin and turn to Jesus Christ, when we believe in Christ and confess Him as Lord and Savior, we become a new creature. We are adopted into God’s heavenly family and begin a new life with Him.

This new life, though, means that the former things we did *should* be a thing of the past. It means that we ought to behave as children of the King and not slaves of the world. Paul did not gloss over the heinous sins of the Corinthians. He wrote that they should not be that way now. God has already declared the Corinthian believers to be righteous because of the righteousness that belongs to Christ. He has become our righteousness. Once we accept Christ as Lord and Savior, we are “justified”, meaning, we are legally God’s born again children. The “washing” which Paul mentioned in this passage refers to the spiritual cleansing from the guilt and dominating power of sin that occurs when we accept Christ as our Lord and Savior. Thus, we need to live in a way that is *consistent* with God’s verdict and our status before Him. Though Paul wrote that the Corinthians “were sanctified”, we should not confuse this with the *ongoing* work of the Holy Spirit in a believer’s life. If we say that we follow Jesus, there should be fruit that the Spirit is working in our lives. Do you see that fruit? Are you different now than before?

The Ministry of Restoring Relationships

One thing we see by living in a community is the need to restore relationships. Being a part of a community means cultivating relationships with one another. Every once in a while, a relationship becomes something that it should not be. Relationships are worth restoring, though. A significant amount of the New Testament is devoted to teaching us how to get along with one another. God has restored our relationship with Him through Jesus Christ, and He has given to us the ministry of restoring relationships of other people with God (2 Corinthians 5:18). Making peace is part of our mission.

James 3:18 *And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

Scripture teaches us to be patient with one another, forgiving, gracious, and kind. That is not our natural behavior. We are a quarrelsome, self-defensive bunch of people. We have to learn how to get along and how to remain at peace with one another, even with those we love the most. When we do so, we honor God and display His love to the world around us. The following are several steps to restoring fellowship that are based on Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Life*.

1. *Talk to God before talking to the person.* Since we all have selfish desires and are easily motivated by the wrong things, we need to go to God first with our problems.
2. *Take the initiative.* Jesus said, "If you are about to make a sacrifice and remember a friend has a grudge against you, leave immediately, go to the friend and make things right. Then come back and work things out with God" (Matthew 5:23-24).
3. *Sympathize with their feelings.* In order for people to hear what you are saying, they need to know you heard them. You should sympathize with what they are feeling.
4. *Confess your part.* We all sin, so it is a possibility you contributed to the conflict you are trying to resolve. Jesus said, "First get rid of the log from your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in another's eye" (Matthew 7:5).
5. *Attack the problem, not the person.* This is where we go wrong sometimes. We go from addressing the problem to attacking the person. Stay on target!
6. *Be calm in your response.* How well will you resolve anything if you are not calm? A gentle response defuses anger, but a sharp tongue kindles a temper-fire; the more pleasant your words are, the more persuasive you will be (Proverbs 15:1; 16:21).
7. *Cooperate as much as possible.* Do everything possible on your part to live in peace with everybody (Romans 12:18).
8. *Emphasize reconciliation, not resolution.* The goal is not to fix the problem, but to reconcile relationships. We need to work hard at being a community (1 Peter 3:11).

Conclusion

In closing, we need to expect conflict with others, even others within the church. We will not always agree, but how we handle those disputes matters. We should be able to handle our disagreements in a Christ-like manner. Even when others hurt us, we have a duty to our Lord and Savior to respond as He would respond, with love, understanding and a desire for peace and reconciliation. Let us follow Jesus' example, who humbled Himself and sought peace with His own enemies. Let us work together with the Holy Spirit to be a people of peace, just like the Prince of Peace we follow. Let us be the Church, the family of God who loves one another and serves one another and who shows the world the Savior we love so much. May it be. Amen!