

# BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE

**Sermon Series:** Corinthian Collisions (When Relationships Collide)

**To be used with:** Session Five: Step In

**Sermon Title Possibilities:**

Courting Conflict

Identity Theft

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 6:1-11

**Connection to Unit Theme:** The small group study “When Relationships Collide” covers several different character vignettes from throughout the Old and New Testament to show positive ways of dealing with conflict. This sermon series focuses on one church to teach on the same principles. The church in Corinth was arguably the most dysfunctional church of all time (if you wanted to be *really* bold, you could title this series, “You Think *We’ve* Got Problems?”). Throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul is the voice of the impassioned church planter, patiently (for the most part) addressing the specific conflicts that were dividing this young church.

The small group session this week is called “Step In” and the main point is, “Step in to keep a bad situation from getting worse.” Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 6 is about lawsuits among unbelievers. An appropriate connection to the small group material would be to present a lawsuit as “a bad situation getting worse,” and confronting fellow believers as what it means to “step in” before it gets to that point

*Note:* I [James] struggled more with this outline than with any other in this set. The issue of whether or not Christians should press lawsuits against other Christians was the hardest one for me to make practical for 21<sup>st</sup> century believers, especially when we consider issues such as abuse, fraud, child support, and so forth. What got me “unstuck” on this topic was an excellent sermon by Keith Krell, pastor of Fourth Memorial Church in Spokane, WA and associate professor of biblical exposition at Moody Bible Institute–Spokane. Dr. Krell did both his DMin. and PhD work on preaching through the letters of Paul. His clarification of what this passage doesn’t mean, as well as his focus on our identity in Christ, were extremely helpful. You can read his entire manuscript here.

<http://bible.org/seriespage/courting-sin-1-corinthians-61-11>

**Introduction:** (adapted from Pratt’s Holman New Testament Commentary, p. 85) Have you ever taken your car to the mechanic because of a strange noise or squeak, only to be told that the noise you heard was just the symptom of a much bigger problem? What you thought was simply a brake pad that needed to be replaced turned out to be a cracked axle or a bad bearing or any number of things that added up to major damage.

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul addressed a squeak in Corinth. Some believers were taking other believers to court before unbelievers. Now today, we might not think that was such a big deal. We are such a lawsuit-happy society (it’s been said that our national motto has changed from “In God We Trust” to “I’ll see you in court”) that it hardly seems surprising, especially in a large church, that there would be disputes leading to civil action between members of the same church. But for Paul, this was a symptom of a much larger problem: the Corinthians neither understood nor lived the gospel. And I wonder, if we understood the gospel better, would we be more disturbed by the idea of believers suing each other?

Today, I’d like to explore two big ideas from 1 Corinthians 6:1-11, and add a third big idea that might help us deal with disputes before they get to the point of legal action in the first place.

**1. Take it to the church, not the court (1 Cor. 6:1-8)** Paul was furious that members of the church were settling their petty disputes with one another in pagan courtrooms. The word “dare” in verse 1 comes from the same word translated “bold.” Essentially, Paul is saying, “How can you be so boldly defiant as to dare to do something as utterly reprehensible in the sight of God as suing one another in full view of a watching world?” (Bertolini, 95)

- Christians suing other Christians embarrasses the body. In ancient Greece, the court system was even more of a public spectacle than it is today. Dr. Krell provides great background to how the Corinthian legal system worked:

The courtroom was in the public square or the marketplace. In Athens (and Corinth was undoubtedly similar), a legal dispute was brought before a court known as The Forty. The Forty picked a public arbitrator, who had to be a citizen in his 60th year, to hear the case. If it still wasn't settled it went to a jury court, which consisted of 201 citizens (if the case involved less than a certain amount of money, perhaps \$1000 today), and 401 (if more than \$1000). Some juries were as large as 6000 citizens over 30 years of age. It is plain to see that in a Greek city every man was more or less a lawyer and spent a lot of time deciding or listening to cases.

- It is important to clarify some things Paul *doesn't* mean in this passage [adapted from Dr. Krell's sermon]:
  - This doesn't mean we should never use the secular court system. Paul had a high regard for the Roman justice system. [Acts 18](#) tells us that in the city of Corinth during Paul's time there, the Jews had dragged him before the proconsul; a man named Gallio had accused him of treason, of preaching a religion that would undermine Rome. Gallio listened to it and said, “No, this is a minor religious dispute. This has no place in a court of law.” So Paul himself benefited from the fairness of Roman justice. In [Rom 13:4](#), Paul makes it clear that secular civil law courts are valid and needed.
  - This also doesn't mean believers are prohibited from pressing criminal charges, even against another believer. The fact that in verse 8 he says, “Why not rather be cheated” implies these were civil, not criminal cases. Paul does not specify any criminal cases because he teaches elsewhere that these must be handled by the state ([Rom 13:3-4](#)). We must always distinguish between sins and crimes. Sins are handled by the church while crimes are handled by the state. Both are God's governing authorities. Furthermore, when a crime has been committed, a Christian may at times be obligated to turn a fellow-Christian in and even to testify against him in court. The church does not have jurisdiction over criminal justice—that belongs to the state, according to [Romans 13](#).

**2. Remember who you are in the first place (1 Cor. 6:2-3, 9-11)**

- If you're going to judge angels, you can mediate between brothers (2-4)

- Paul's teaching here has been interpreted in several different ways throughout history. Some believe Paul is saying we will judge fallen angels when we reign with Christ during the millennial reign of Christ. Others suggest that angels will assist believers (Heb. 1:14) when they exercise authority over the nations during the Millennium (Bertolini 97). Don't get hung up with interpretations. Paul's point is that if we are going to have this responsibility, then even "men of little account" in the church (v. 4) are more qualified than the judges of this world to settle disputes among believers.
  - We are brothers and sisters in Christ. Even in our litigious culture, lawsuits between family members are rare. And we are always saddened when we see biological brothers and sisters attacking one another in a court of law. But spiritual brothers and sisters share an even stronger bond than biological siblings. As believers, the power of the gospel ought to compel us to live by the law of love (James 2:8). It should make us serve one another (Galatians 5:13). We should follow the example of Christ and not demand our rights, even when wronged (Philippians 2:5-11). And we ought to consider one another as more important than ourselves (Phil. 2:3). What does it say (or not say) about the transforming power of the gospel to a watching world when we can't settle disputes with one another?
  - You've been forgiven of much, so you can forgive much (8-11)
    - If you use the courts to "cheat and do wrong" to another believer, you may not be saved in the first place. Sometimes we put so much emphasis on the big sexual sins Paul lists in verse 9 that we miss the fact that the greedy, the slanderous, and swindlers (v. 10) also "will not inherit the kingdom of God."
    - Paul's abrupt turn into a catalog of sins seems out of place in his teaching about lawsuits at first. But then you get to verse 11: "And some of you used to be like this. 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. Remember Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21-35? It's the same point. When we remember how much we have been forgiven in Christ, it puts our petty grievances against one another in proper perspective.
3. **Intervene before it Escalates:** It's hard for us today to imagine a scenario in which we would take a property dispute with another church member to our pastor. You wouldn't expect your Sunday School teacher to give you legal representation in a divorce settlement. And if siblings in our church were arguing over the terms of their parent's will, they wouldn't go to the board of deacons. But here's what we can do: we can be so committed to one another in community that disputes and disagreements would not escalate to the point of legal action in the first place.
- James 4:1 says, "What is the source of wars and fights among you? Don't they come from the cravings that are at war within you?" So can we help one another keep our own selfish natures in check? Our small groups ought to be places full of people who trust each other enough to share their honest struggles, and who care enough about

- each other to hold one another accountable. Maybe a couple in our church wouldn't get to the point of contemplating divorce in the first place if they were in tight community with other couples who were helping them through disagreements.
- In the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:25), Jesus teaches us to "Reach a settlement quickly with your adversary while you're on the way with him, or your adversary will hand you over to the judge, the judge to the officer, and you will be thrown into prison." In other words, intervene before it escalates. If you can't reach an agreement together, then get help from others in the church (Mt. 18:15).

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