

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Church - a Work in Progress

(Studies in 1 Corinthians)

Losing and Winning

(1 Corinthians 6:1-8)

Study #7

Introduction: Pyrrhic victories...

History tells us that a Greek king who lived in the third century BC won a decisive military victory over the dominant force in the world at that time, the Romans.

However, that victory came at the price of many of the king's soldiers. So, soon after that victory, Rome destroyed the king's depleted army in a second battle.

The name of the king was Pyrrhus. He is famous for having won the battle while losing the war. That's how we have come to refer to a short-term victory that results in a long-term loss a "Pyrrhic Victory."

When Japan destroyed the US Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor in 1941, in their own words, they "*woke a sleeping giant*" that later would defeat them. Pearl Harbor was, for the Japanese, a Pyrrhic victory.

A husband or a wife or a friend may win an argument, but if doing so comes at the cost of the relationship, it was a Pyrrhic win.

Today, Paul warns Christians and churches that it is possible to suffer a "Pyrrhic Victory," where a near-term win becomes a long-term loss.

We also learn that in Jesus, we can also follow a riskier path, choose to lose, and potentially set up a tremendous long-term win.

Review...

Last Sunday, we listened as Paul began to deal with issues of purity in the church in Corinth. Paul told that church that the net effect of the sin of one man in the church was so negative that he should be removed from the church. He would have a terribly negative leavening influence if he wasn't removed.

We'll return to the theme of purity in what we'll see next Sunday. (1 Corinthians 6:9-20)

But when Paul mentioned "judgment" against this sinning brother, I think he started thinking along other lines and so addressed another pressing problem at the church in Corinth.

The Ugly Spectacle of Christians Who Choose to Sue (vv. 1-6)

[6:1] Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints?¹ [2] Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? If the world is judged by you, are you not competent to form the smallest law courts? [3] Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more matters of this life? [4] So if you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church? [5] I say this to your shame.² Is it so, that there is not among you anyone wise who will be able to decide between his brothers and sisters, [6] but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers?

The Corinthian Scene

Litigious societies we have known and loved

¹ When Paul mentioned the "*unrighteous*" and the "*saints*" (v. 1), he did NOT mean that secular judges always lead unrighteous lives or that believers are always *saintly*. Instead, he was referring by these descriptions to non-Christians (those not justified before God) and Christians (those who are justified).

² Earlier, (1 Corinthians 4:14), Paul said that he was NOT writing to shame his readers. Here, he says that they should be ashamed of their actions.

21st century USA

Today, news of litigation and lawsuits are sprinkled through every news cycle. It seems like everywhere we look, somebody is suing somebody else for something.

The idea of tort reform has been discussed a lot lately, and it may be just around the corner. But tort reform has been just around the corner for decades. I'm not holding my breath. I think it is likely that our society will continue to be a litigious one.

It is and probably will remain perfectly legal for you to sue anybody you want for any reason you might choose at any time that is convenient for however much money you might name.

You might not win, of course, but that's part of the game. Taking fellow Americans to court has become one of our favorite past times.

In that, we're a lot like Roman society in the first century.

First-century Roman society

I've read that in ancient Rome, a citizen could sue another citizen over a wrong suffered, a right trampled on, or over a property dispute. I've read that this happened frequently.

We even read of this happening in the New Testament. People would bring others before the city's secular tribunal. (the *bema*)

So, the first century Roman society of which the Corinthian church was a part, was a litigious society. Like ours.

What Paul was addressing in the verses we just read was a serious problem for the Corinthian church. The church at Corinth was a litigious church.

The litigious church

It isn't surprising that Christians, from time to time, will have issues with each other. In the normal course of things, that happens in every human relationship.

Literal neighbors will have disputes, and "*neighbors*" in a church will have disagreements, arguments, and conflict. The peace that exists in any family or neighborhood or church is a fragile thing. Life gets messy. There are conflicts.

There will inevitably be personality and style clashes, opinion clashes. In the church, there will be clashes about beliefs and practices. All of these and more arise in life in the church, and with regularity.

All of that was happening in the church in Corinth. But the Christians there had adopted a terrible approach to dealing with those clashes. Corinthian Christians were taking each other to the secular Roman courts to settle their disputes.

We're going to spend time getting to understand this situation on the way to hearing Paul make a point that speaks exactly to us.

He first pointed out how wildly inappropriate this practice was.

A Wildly Inappropriate Scene

Since the saints will one day judge...

...the world

Paul asks, **[2] Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world?**

First, please understand that Paul was NOT thinking of a time when secular courts would be filled with Christian judges.

It isn't at all a bad thing when a Christian becomes a judge in the secular arena. But I can guarantee that this was the farthest thing from Paul's mind here.

It would have been an impossibility in the first century and isn't much more likely in our own time that all judges will be Christians.

What he means is that among the many types of rewards given to Christians who have been faithful in this life, some will have the privilege of ruling and administering justice over the world, during Jesus' future, one-thousand-year reign. (What we call "the Millennial Reign of Christ.")

We find the seed of that idea in Matthew's and Luke's gospels³ and John makes the point clearly in the book of Revelation. (20:4)

Paul had probably taught this idea to the Corinthians during the year and a half that he had been with them when he won them to Christ and then disciplined them.

They were all aware of the possibility of their future role as the world's judges.

But they evidently hadn't considered the implications of that for the here and now. So, Paul spelled it out for them.

[2]...If the world is judged by you, are you not competent to form the smallest law courts?... [5]...Is it so, that there is not among you anyone wise who will be able to decide between his brothers and sisters?

Christians who will one day have a hand in judging the world can't plead an inability to "judge" disagreements in the church.

It just makes sense that if believers are going to judge the world in the future, they should be able to judge the matters that come up between them in church and in their relationships with each other, rather than go running to the secular courts.⁴

Paul then brought up another reason to rebuke the Corinthians for going outside the church to get help in settling disputes in the church.

...angels

[3] Do you not know that we will judge angels?

As we just saw, there is good evidence in the New Testament that faithful believers will, one day, have a hand in judging the world. I haven't found any evidence that "***we will judge angels***" - except here.

According to several New Testament passages, angels will be judged.⁵ Here, Paul says - and I believe him - that in some way we will play a role in that judgment.⁶

Given this, Paul wrote, ***[3]...How much more matters of this life?***

Since they were going to judge supernatural beings, surely they should be able to handle mundane / terrestrial / earthly matters.⁷

Here is the church that evidently boasted of its wisdom having to borrow wisdom from Corinthian judges to get legal satisfaction. They didn't even consider the possibility of finding within their own ranks a wise person who might handle their disputes.

In any case, they should not at all be taking their cases to the city's courts and judges.

...Christians should NOT settle in court before secular judges

I don't think that Paul was concerned that the Corinthians would have been treated unfairly or unjustly if they went to Roman courts.

When Luke described what happened when Paul was brought before a Roman official while he was in Corinth (the proconsul, Gallio), it's clear that Paul was treated very fairly and justly. (See Acts 18:12-17)

⁵ See 2 Peter 2:4, Jude 6; Rev. 20:10 - although all of these verses refer to demons.
⁶ Does he mean good or bad angels? If good, what could possibly be their judgment? Most of the time, when Paul refers to "angels" he means good angels and uses other terms to describe bad angels. There is much we don't understand here.
⁷ It is conceivable that the cases being brought forward were actually dealing with church issues, when even a wise and just non-believing judge would be ill-equipped to render judgment.

³ Most notably at Matthew 19:28 and Luke 22:28ff...

⁴ What kinds of disagreements? We don't know.

Generally speaking, Paul's opinion of non-Christian judges and rulers was very favorable (See Romans 13).

But Christians should settle disputes - not in secular court - but with each other in the church.⁸ First, because of who Christians are to each other.

A Better Way

Christians are family

[6] but brother goes to law against brother...

It isn't an organizational preference; it's an organic necessity that disputes between Christians be resolved internally. This is family. We're brothers and sisters.

Everyone who names the name of Jesus is brother or sister to everyone else who names the name of Jesus.

All of us who have believed in Jesus have received the Spirit, have been forgiven, have received a spiritual gift, are children of God.

But litigation will divide a church. It is hard to be united with somebody if you're suing the pants off of them.

We can only imagine how hard it would be to take the bread and the cup of communion with someone you had just sued - or been sued by - in small claims court at the Bexar County Courthouse.

But, in addition to the damage such actions did to church unity, they also materially harmed the church's witness and testimony.

Witness

I have learned that first-century Jewish rabbis said that lawsuits between fellow Jews should never be tried in secular courts. Their

internal disputes were always to be settled within the community, lest their internal conflict bring them into reproach by the Gentiles.

Religious groups from among the Romans and Greeks held to the same practice. They knew that internal squabbling reflected poorly on their group's reputation in a city.

Well, Christians have way stronger bonds in Jesus than the Jews did in Moses or than the Greeks and Romans did in their polytheism or their philosophies.

That's why Paul was concerned that the church work things out.

These cases hindered the work of God among the non-Christians in Corinth. It is hard to present a good case for the life-changing, saving power of Jesus when His people are tying up the courts with lawsuits against each other.

Paul's words, **[6]...and that before unbelievers?** reminded the church that they were damaging their witness before people who didn't know Christ by their actions.⁹

As important as whatever the issue dividing Christians might be, Christians always have to remember at every point that there are people all around who are watching who don't know Jesus.

They're taking notes. They are learning about our faith by the way we live. So, in whatever actions a Christian takes he should take into account the effects of his actions on the lost person.

Put yourself in the shoes of an unbelieving Roman judge.

When you see a Christian taking another Christian to court, you'll easily doubt the validity of Christianity and reject the Gospel on account of the lovelessness shown from Christian to Christian.

To summarize everything we've seen so far, we could simply say, *"Corinthians, stop taking each other to court!"*

⁸ When Paul referred to those who were **"of no account in the church"** (v. 4), he didn't mean what we often mean when we say someone is *"of no account."* Paul was simply saying that these unbelieving judges have no standing in the church.

⁹ That phrase was not intended as a slam against the non-Christians of Corinth.

And my summary application for this morning could be, “*Don’t sue each other!*” - and I sure do hope that we don’t sue each other.

And that would be an appropriate way to wrap up the message, except that Paul didn’t drop the subject at the end of verse six. He kept on addressing the same theme, but with a very important twist.

In what follows, we learn that all that Paul had said about the damage done by lawsuits in secular courts between believers was to drive home a more central issue.

That central issue is the importance of down in the trenches, sacrificial, self-denying, risky, Christ-like love.

The Beautiful Scene of Christians Who Choose to Lose (vv. 7-8)

When a Win is a Loss (6:7a)

[7a] Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another.

Anybody who sues someone knows that they could lose. And anybody who is sued by another knows that they could lose. In every lawsuit there is a winner and there is a loser.

Paul says that the mere fact that there is a lawsuit between two Christians is a loss. There are no winners.

It’s an all-around defeat both because of the violation of love against a Christian brother or sister AND because of the damage done to the witness of the church before a watching world.

Paul says that it doesn’t matter which Christian comes out on top. Nobody wins.

The Christian who wins in a lawsuit against a fellow Christian has only a Pyrrhic Victory. He won a battle and lost the war.

So, a Christian can appeal to the fellowship if he has suffered an injustice from a brother. That’s where he is to look for justice.¹⁰

I’ve read about churches that have actually set up that kind of a system in their fellowships for this to happen.

It’s not at all a bad idea and is no doubt appropriate at some times and for some situations.

And it’s while we’re thinking these thoughts that we listen to what I think is one of the most astonishing things Paul ever wrote.

He says that at some times and in some situations, there is another way to handle injustice. But it’s riskier.

Choosing Defeat to turn a Loss Into a Win (vv. 7b-8)

[7b] Why not rather suffer the wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? [8] On the contrary, you yourselves do wrong and defraud. And this to your brothers and sisters.

There is something about Paul’s words that is absurd.

Why not just allow myself to be wronged and defrauded? What kind of a mentality is that? Is Paul now promoting a doormat theology?

His words may rub us wrong at first, but we let them settle for a minute and we’re intrigued, too.

He’s calling into question the whole idea of boundaries, standing up for ourselves, refusing to let others take advantage of us.

The idea that we should put in place boundaries that offer protection against harm is a very important concept. I will admit that I have a lot to learn about boundaries, but it’s an idea that I affirm.

The idea surfaces in one of Jesus’ parables.

¹⁰ Some churches have set up arbitration teams and ministries that serve this purpose.

In this parable, we watch a widow approach a judge in her city to get justice from her legal opponent. This **“unrighteous judge”** gave this gutsy widow what she sought because she was so determined to get what was rightfully hers. (Luke 18)

She had set a personal boundary. And the idea of boundaries even played out even in Paul’s life.

Once, when he was in Jerusalem, he was about to be unjustly beaten by Roman soldiers.

While the soldiers were laying him out to be interrogated by flogging, he asked them **[Acts 22:5] “Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?”**

Paul set a boundary there. He took advantage of his Roman citizenship to keep from being beaten. Yet here he suggests to the Corinthians that they set no boundaries. Be wronged. Take your lumps.

But this isn’t the only time Paul laid out this idea of not setting personal boundaries.

He told the Ephesian church that they were all to **“be subject to one another.”** That command is staggering. It leaves us wondering, **“Whatever happened to my rights?”**

He wrote to the church in Philippi that they were each to consider the needs of others more important than their own. (See Philippians 2) That looks like lowering (or even removing) boundaries. It’s beautiful poetry, but how do I live that way?

And he’ll go on to tell the Corinthians that he hasn’t made use of all the freedoms he had in Christ or of all the authority he had as an apostle. (See 1 Corinthians 9)

And if it seems that there is still something absurd about Paul’s rhetorical questions to the Corinthians, we are still drawn to them because they remind us of other things we’ve read, things that Jesus said.

Remember His “Sermon on the Mount.” He said things there that we may not reflect on very much, words that we have filed away in the “impractical” drawer.

[Matthew 5:39] “But I say to you, do not show opposition against an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other toward him also. [40] And if anyone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak also. [41] Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. [42] Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.”

Today, what Paul has to say here at the end (vv. 7-8) compels us to dust off Jesus’ words and ask if He was serious in a way that we have never imagined? Does love require more giving, more selflessness, more cost, and more risk than we had ever dreamed?

Paul’s life shows us he wasn’t recommending a boundary-less life.

But Jesus was saying (and Paul followed Jesus’ lead) that it is legitimate to set aside personal boundaries at those times when it is possible that a long-term (think eternal) win might be won by a short-term (temporal) loss of privilege, rights, pleasure, or freedom.

Give up a Pyrrhic Victory (winning the battle but losing the war) for an eternal one.

As we close today, I want to highlight a theme that is obvious in Paul’s concluding remarks. It is a theme that always surfaces when we talk about love. It is the theme of risk.

Conclusion:

To love someone is to put something at risk. It could be resources of time, energy, or money, reputation, or personal safety.

If we aren't laying something down, giving something up, risking the loss of something, we probably aren't loving.

Listen to what Jesus called His "New Commandment" as if for the first time and hear the risk involved.

[John 13:34] "I am giving you a new commandment, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, that you also love one another. [35] By this all people will know that you are My disciples: if you have love for one another."

What was "new" about this commandment is that Jesus raised the bar that defined love so much higher than it ever had been, that it wasn't just a restatement of an important command. It was NEW.

Love the way Jesus loved. And how did Jesus love? He laid down His life for us.

He suffered, believing and praying that His Father would raise Him up again and would re-welcome Him into glory.

That kind of love is exactly what He commands those who follow Him to have for each other. It's the unmistakable mark of discipleship.

In the great prayer He prayed on His last night with the apostles, Jesus prayed that we would love each other, because it is our unity in love that will let the world know that God sent Jesus into the world.

[John 17:20] "I am not asking on behalf of these alone, but also for those who believe in Me through their word; [21] that they may all be one; just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me."¹¹

If I understand what Jesus was saying in John 13 and 17, there is no witness for the truth of the Gospel stronger than Christians' love for each other.

When we are showing each other down in the trenches, self-denying, sacrificial love, there will be staggering impact.

But to step into that kind of love is to step into an epic quest of adventure and risk.

Kathy and I used to own a yacht. Actually, it was a ten-foot-long Sunfish sailboat that we occasionally took out to either Medina or Canyon Lake when those lakes used to have water in them.

When we added our third child, our house shrunk. So, we grew our house by selling Kathy's favorite couch and bought the boat.

Over the years we had a lot of fun on some sailing trips with the kids and the boat. But there was one trip that wasn't much fun.

I took our older son, Ben, with me, to Canyon Lake. It was a beautiful summer day, a perfect day for sailing.

But once we launched the boat and got out on to the lake, we realized that there was no wind. None. Totally calm.

I have always pictured the Sea of Galilee AFTER Jesus stilled the storm looking like Canyon Lake looked that day.

Ben and I hoped the wind would pick up while we were on the lake, but it never did. The most memorable moment of that day was when Ben and I looked at each other in this dead calm and said to each other at the same time, ***"What a bore."***

Sailing without wind and waves is a bore. You don't go anywhere. You don't make any progress.

Add wind, and you can fly across the lake. There's some risk involved, but the thrill is worth the risk.

Christians who choose safe coves and never get into the open water of risky love don't make any progress. Churches that don't expose themselves to interpersonal rough seas and high winds and who look for smooth sailing are boring.

¹¹ This is what the late theologian and philosopher, Francis Schaeffer, called, "The Final Apologetic."

The thrill of loving the way Jesus loved is worth the risk of any loss.

Who knows?

- The payoff for the injustice you endure just might be the repentance of your friend.
- The money you give to help someone in need who has just dissed you might result in reconciliation.
- The wrong you suffer or the cheating by someone else against you that you might choose to simply “take” might result in the growth of the person who wronged you.

We don't always do away with all personal boundaries. And we don't pull down boundaries because we're adopting a doormat theology.

But we gladly lay down a boundary and “*choose to lose*” when we perceive the possibility of a long-term win if we will put up with a short-term loss.

Such is the adventure of the life of the Christian who loves as Jesus loved.