

Dear Jerri, #14

I want to set a context for reading I Corinthians 6, which might provide a new way of understanding it. I do not know if I'm right about this. What I am trying to do is to account for some things about this text that are often treated as idiosyncrasies or ignored altogether. In fact, I am trying to let Paul himself set the context for the controversial verses 9-10 in this chapter.

A part of this chapter that is often marginalized when it comes to verses 9-10 is the way it opens. In verses 1-8, Paul is aghast to learn that the Corinthians are taking one another to civil court. From the language that he uses in chapter 5, which continues into this chapter, the subject matter in these controversies is generally sexual immorality or greed and the players are family members.

The fact that these disputes are mostly family matters in these controversies may not be clear because of some choices that some translations make. The NRSV translates v.6 as the end of a long question this way: "but a *believer* goes to court against a *believer*—and before *unbelievers* at that?" This translation makes it look like the contrast is between believers (*pistoi*) and unbelievers (*a/pistoi*). The problem is, in the first two cases, Paul does not use the word for "believers" (*pistoi*) but the word for "brother" (*adelphoi*). The NRSV uses "believer" to make it gender-inclusive. While the intent is good, the choice is misleading. If verse 6 says, "but a *brother* goes to court against a *brother* ..." then we would see that the issue here is a family matter. Verse 5 likewise should read, "Is there nobody among you wise enough to judge between *brothers*?" Paul is using family language deliberately, so even if we want to make it more gender inclusive, it should read "sibling" rather than "believer." To make it "believer" assumes that Paul is using the term "brother" metaphorically – as he does on occasion. In this case, I think he is using it literally.

Michael Peppard has shown that in many cities within the Roman Empire – and this appears to be true in Corinth – there were courts that specifically adjudicated family matters, particularly regarding inheritance.¹ These were the places where brother would take brother to court in an open public exhibition of rhetoric, accusations, and scandal. The inheritance matters often involved what to do with a mistress or a half-sibling born to a prostitute. Some of the cases sound like the headlines of magazines in the checkout line at the grocery store. Others sound like the kind of scandals Paul is addressing in Corinth! There are accounts of wise people advising others – in language very similar to Paul's letter – not to drag the family's business into the public square, to settle among themselves, and even to suffer wrong rather than to win in such an ugly spectacle. I believe these family courts are the place where the church folk of Corinth are taking one another to adjudicate their disputes.

¹ Michael Peppard, "Brother against Brother: *Controversiae* about Inheritance Disputes and I Corinthians 6:1-11," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133, no.1 (2014), pp. 179-192.

When Paul begins v.9 with the question, “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not *inherit* the kingdom of God?” I do not believe he is offering a list of “vices” that keep people out of God’s reign. I believe he is making a statement about inheritance laws, contrasting the kind of “justice” that one gets in the family court and the kind of “forgiveness” that one experiences in Christ. If we take our controversies to the family court, they will side on the side of the righteous and against the unrighteous. (In verse 9, the word translated as “wrongdoers” or “unrighteous” *a/dikoi* is key. Remember it.) The justice of the family court says this: Illegitimate children (think about what that term means, literally – children-not-legal) are not the same as legit children; adopted relations are not the same as blood relations; someone who has a history of drunkenness or swindling is not treated as reliably as someone who has never had that history; and those who deviate from acceptable social sexual norms do not deserve the same justice as those who fit within the social definition of family. That is how justice works in a system that is shaped by dominant public morals. In the family court system, the unrighteous folks (*a/dikoi*), who can be described by verses 9-10, will not receive the inheritance of the Reign of God.

But, the church does not operate like the family court. In the church the operating principle is forgiveness, rather than exacting justice. That is why Paul reminds them in verse 11 that some of them were precisely the kind of people who would lose their inheritance in family court. What follows is this: “But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were *justified* in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” The verb “justified” here – translated as “declared righteous” in Young’s Literal Translation – is the opposite of the word “unrighteous.” The unrighteous (*a/dikoi*) are “declared righteous” (*dikaio*) in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the key difference between the perspective of the church and the perspective of the family court. That is why it is madness for the church to take one another to court: They belong to a different reign altogether than a world that does not know what it means to be justified in the name of Jesus.

Verses 9-10 may indeed be a list of vices that show who cannot inherit the Reign of God, but *it represents a perspective that is only true apart from the gospel*. Within the church we are all alike justified in the name of Christ. And while we may have our controversies, our family disputes, and our inheritance battles, we have a whole different perspective on what constitutes justice. Jesus Christ is the difference.

Until next week,
Mark

~ **The Rev. Dr. D. Mark Davis**