

1 Corinthians 6

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Date: 22 March 2026

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[0:00] If you can open your Bibles again to 1 Corinthians chapter 6, just a reminder, it's page 954! If you're following in a black church Bible. I doubt you'll have missed over the last few years that there is something of a rift, something of a feud in the British royal family. It's being played out for all to see. Prince Harry has had something of a public falling out with both his older brother and his father, the king. That much is clear. Relationships within the family seem to have broken down if the press are to be believed. Certainly when I was talking to Prince William the other day, he told me that was the case. Slurs and allegations, it seems, have gone in all directions. It's not a good look for the family. They're making headlines pretty consistently with the fact that they're not getting on.

Part of the reason that this fascinates the media so much, I think, is because this is not how royals should behave. That somewhat apocryphal tale told that the queen and her sister were running out to the car at one point when they were little and their mother said, royal children, royal manners. Probably didn't happen, probably apocryphal, but the sentiment is actually pretty consistent. If you're a royal, you're supposed to behave in a particular way.

So, one of the things that would be pretty clear is you don't air your grievances in public. You don't involve people who don't understand the hows and the whys of royalty in the family business. It damages our reputation. It cheapens the family. You don't behave like this because, as a royal, it's not just about you. If you're born into royalty, it's not just about you. It's about something much bigger than you, the great institution. Well, there's something of that spirit, I think, in Paul's tone with the Corinthians when we get to chapter 6. Verse 1, when one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? And verse 19, down at the end of our section, you're not your own. You are bought with a price.

The apostles continuing to address these problems in the church, the church at Corinth. Last week, the issue we saw was unrepentant sin. Someone in the congregation, chapter 5, is sinning in a very public way, but they're not repenting, and nobody's calling them to repentance. And so, Paul addresses that with the church. This week, he confronts the church on two related issues. The first is their unchecked pride—that's what's going on in verses 1 to 11—and their uncontrolled passions—that's verses 12 to 20. And in both cases, the influence and the values of those outside the church, this category of people that the apostle Paul calls the unrighteous, they're setting the pace. And that's not how it should be, the apostle says. It's not fitting for brothers in the church, verse 6. Those who have been set apart for God, verse 11. Those who are, verse 17, joined to the Lord, who are filled with the Holy Spirit, verse 19, and so who belong to God. It is not fitting for people who have received all of that to behave in the way that they're behaving. And at the heart of Paul's rebuke is the damage that this does, both to them as a community, but also to their public reputation. So let's have a look.

[3:41] It starts, first of all, point number one, their unchecked pride. That's, I think, the issue at the heart of things at the beginning of chapter 6. Some church members are taking other church members to secular courts, verse 1, before the unrighteous. Verse 6, brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers. The disagreements relate to civil matters, not criminal ones, probably defrauding of some kind. That's the language in verses 7 and 8. Business partnerships, perhaps, where one party has ripped the other one off in some way. Perhaps someone

providing a service, and bills aren't being paid. Somebody doing some work, one member of the church doing some work, they're a tradesman, perhaps, they're doing some work for another member of the church, and bills aren't being paid. And what do they do? Well, they do what everyone in the wider culture does. They go legal. The Spirit is a proud sense of, I am going to get what I'm owed, no matter what.

I don't care about them. I'm going to get what I'm owed. Or perhaps the sense, how dare someone treat me in that way? See underneath both of those, there is this sense that there's superiority in their tone. And this is a mistake. It's a mistake for three reasons, partly because the church has a competence to judge in these matters. This is a matter for the church.

Do you see verse 2? 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? Now, he's not using the word judge here. The saints won't judge the world in the sense of the last judgment. He's using it the way the word is used in the book of Judges. Believers will be given authority to rule the new earth. Even angels, verse 3, will be under the oversight of the redeemed. It's a remarkable thing to think about, but that is part of our design as the people of God. That is where we're headed. That is our future.

And because that's our future, the apostle says, we should be practicing now with these smaller matters that arise within the covenant community. Now, in reality, it won't feel like a small matter, will it? If you're the one who's been wronged, it never feels like a small matter. And nor probably will it feel small to the church as we adjudicate the matter. But what Paul is saying here is, in light of the cosmic rule that we will fulfill as a people of God in glory, your money and your reputation in the here and now, those are small things. Verse 2, do you see the word he uses? They are trivial, trivial matters. And God has imbued the church, the local church, and then at presbytery level with the competence and authority to resolve them.

[6:23] First mistake is because God has given us the competence to deal with it. Second mistake is because of who they are asking to do the judging. Verse 9, he repeats this emphasis, do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?

Why would you let someone who doesn't think and act in line with God's kingdom adjudicate on these matters? It's like the royal family saying, why are we involving people out there that don't understand the hows and whys of royalty in our business? And verses 10 and 11, Paul lists the vices that belong to the kingdom of this world, a kingdom that the Corinthians were once a part of, and he says, but that's not you anymore. You were washed. You were sanctified. You were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. He's saying, you have been set apart by God.

You've been counted righteous. You've been given a spirit. So don't seek out the wisdom of the old world, the old you, the old values, the old way of doing things in order to adjudicate these matters. Now remember, these aren't criminal cases. You take criminal cases to the police. But if you're in the church and you're in dispute with another believer, you bring it to the leaders. If you're here and you're a member of this church and you're in dispute with someone else in this church, you bring it to the session. If you've been wronged, you trust it to the church. If you're the wrongdoer, you submit to the church's judgment. That is God's design. And we trust his Spirit to guide any process. Yes, we follow. So first of all, he's saying it's a mistake because of the fact that God has given you competence in the church to adjudicate these matters. It's a mistake because the people you're going to don't understand the values of the kingdom of God. But it is also a mistake. And this is primarily, I think, where Paul is pushing. It is also a mistake because of what is lost. That is really why Paul says, going to secular court, look at verse 5, I say this to your shame. It is shameful, he's saying, to do this because of what is lost. Let's play this out. Think about it. There is a loss of virtue, a loss of goodness. Verse 8, if you insist on going to court in this way, what you're doing, you're allowing yourself to sink to the same level as the one who defrauds you. There's a sense in which you're repaying their evil with evil. If you go against what Paul is saying here, you're going against Scripture, going against God's design for the resolution of these things, he's saying there is a loss of virtue because you're being dragged down to their level. You are meeting their sin with sin of your own. Secondly, there's a loss of love.

The idea that you get locked into the mindset of, I'm going to make them pay, that attitude is one that is putting you ahead of others. One commentator says this, their litigious spirit betrays a moral

deficiency and reveals the triumph of selfishness over love. If you are saying, I am going to get what I'm owed, I'm going to destroy them if I have to because of what they've done to me, that is us putting ourselves in a position of superiority, a position of selfishness over love. To stand on your rights in these kind of matters is a denial of the gospel of grace. It's the parable of the unforgiving servant, isn't it? You know the story of this man that he is forgiven an absolutely ruinous debt, but he insists that someone who owes him a much smaller amount must pay. Before God, if you are in Christ, before God, you have been forgiven. The greatest debt imaginable, it is an unpayable debt, and you've been forgiven it all. The debt of your sin has been paid. It's far greater debt than any debt that you would be owed by someone else. Now, yes, where someone has defrauded you, they should pay. They should put that right.

[10:42] That is right. But if they can't or if they won't, you should be willing to forgive the debt, and your willingness to do this, your willingness in this case to be wronged, is evidence that you know what it means to be forgiven. When you take them to court, you lose.

It's a loss of love. And by the way, that is also true when the amount is significant. I think all of us think, well, that's realistic if, you know, it's a couple hundred quid, or, you know, maybe a bit more than that, or depending on what we're worth, we think, you know, there's a level there that we're okay with. This principle applies no matter how big, because you see it in light of the great debt that you have been forgiven by Christ. You say, that's not realistic. I say, I'm just telling you what Paul says. A loss of love. Thirdly, it also means there's a loss of unity. You break fellowship with the person who you take to court. But in doing this, you can't avoid also creating factions across the church. These things, it very quickly becomes a test of loyalty. Are you with me? Are you with him? And some will go with me, others with him, and then there are the poor people who were friends with both parties stuck in the middle. Everyone loses. When we draw lines in that way in the life of the church, everyone loses, because there is a complete lack of unity. What invariably happens is there is division in the church, which is a denial, again, of the unity that Christ has won for us. Next, there's a loss of reputation. So, a loss of virtue, a loss of love, a loss of unity, a loss of reputation. The corporate thing that ends up happening is, one of Paul's big concerns here is how the witness of the church is damaged by these bitter disputes.

No one outside the church, nobody that is looking on at the people of God in the church and sees them fighting and bickering and behaving just the way their other unbelieving friends behave, nobody looks at that and says, you know what, that Christianity is really compelling. I really want a part of a community that's as divided and as broken and has so little virtue as that. It really injures the reputation of the church, loss of reputation. And then there's one final area of loss that Paul highlights and it's perhaps the most shocking of all. Look at verse 9. It is a loss of eternal reward.

[13:20] See, when Paul says, do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God, he isn't just saying, why go to them in a dispute, but he, quote one commentator says this, quote, he insinuates that this greedy grasping for advantage in this life may cause the person to lose an eternal inheritance. You can see why that's the case, can't you? See, if your behavior is so lacking in love and you don't care about the effect this has on the unity of Christ's body or the reputation of Christ's name, it is no surprise that God will take a dim view of such things.

It is completely antithetical to what God loves and what God values. And that is why verse 7, Paul will say, why not rather suffer wrong? When you look at all of this loss, everything that is lost, if you go down this route, he says, why not rather suffer wrong? Why not be defrauded?

What's the worst that could happen? You take your case to the church and it's decided the wrong way. Why not? You suffer loss. You come out the wrong side and it's unjust. Well, Paul is clear. More is lost by going to court outside the church than anything that you have lost to that person. It is better, he says, to check your pride and lose out to someone within the church than to pursue them in public and win. It is better to check your pride and to lose in the dispute in the life of the church than to take them out to court in public and win. Winning in a civil court or even in the court of public opinion is to lose in the church and it is to lose in the courts of heaven. It's serious. You can see why Paul is making this an issue that he's going to write to them about and rebuke them on. Their unchecked pride is that destructive.

That's where he starts unchecked pride. Then he turns to the Corinthians, uncontrolled passions. Point number two, their uncontrolled passions. Now he frames this by starting with their freedom in Christ. When Christians have put their faith in Jesus, verse 11, saying to the Corinthians, you're washed, sanctified, justified. That is, through the Lord Jesus and the power of the Spirit, the Corinthians have had their sin washed away and they're set apart for God. This is the heart of the gospel, the heart of the good news of the Christian faith, and it comes to us as a gift.

[15:59] All of those things happened to the Corinthians. You see, they were passive. You were washed. You were sanctified. It was done to them. They didn't achieve it themselves. It is all a gift.

We do not do anything to achieve any of this. None of it is given on the basis of performance. It is simply a gift. It's still the case in our day that if you speak to unbelievers, there is a sense in which many of them think, I've got to be a good boy and a good girl for God to accept me. Come along to church. We'd love to have you for the Why Easter events. Come and hear the good news about Jesus. Oh no, I couldn't do that. I'm not the church-going kind of person. Why not? Well, I'm too bad. I've got to get myself sorted out before I can do that. That's completely the wrong way around. And if you invite someone and they say that to you, say, that's exactly why you need to come. Because there is liberty for you if you will come and hear the truth of the Christian faith, which is that you could never get yourself cleaned up enough for God and He has done it for you in His Son. That is the heart of the good news. We have been set free, not because of what we have done, not because we checked our pride beforehand, not because we controlled our passions beforehand, but because He has been gracious to us. And that freedom is the freedom that we enjoy as Christians.

We are free from the penalty and the irresistible power of sin. We are free from guilt. We are free from shame. When the Son sets you free, you are free indeed. But, Paul says, we then have to use this freedom in the right way. Verse 12, Christian freedom does not allow someone to follow their passions wherever they lead. We think that freedom, our culture has defined freedom as the ability to do whatever we want whenever we want. That's not true freedom. That's slavery. True freedom is being set free from something for something. Set free from the slavery to sin that we experience apart from Christ for obedience to the One who truly sets us free. And it is possible for something to be lawful before God, but for it to have the power to bring you under its authority in a sinful way. That's what Paul is saying here. You have been set free, so go and live in that freedom. But remember that there are certain things that although lawful before God have the power to bring you under their authority. Think about it. Food. Jesus declared all foods clean. All foods, every single one of them. Gluten, dairy, processed meat, high fructose corn syrup. All of them, absolutely clean. All lawful before God. And anybody tells you otherwise, tell them they're wrong. But they're not all helpful. And when you get addicted, they're no longer lawful. Same with alcohol. Lawful, not always helpful. And if you can't do without it, it has ceased to be a freedom. It has enslaved you. It is no longer lawful. You see how it works.

And the issue for Paul here predominantly is sex. Sex is a gift from God that can be used in the right way within the marriage covenant, with the necessary guardrails that that relationship affords.

[19:21] Or it can be used in a way that is not lawful, not pleasing to God. And that's what's going on among the Corinthians. That is what he is writing to address. Sexual immorality, he calls it. Verse 13, verse 18, the word is pornea, where we get pornography, et cetera, from. Sexual immorality, 13 and 18, and prostitutes, verse 15 specifically. And it's interesting, he doesn't single out an individual. He did that last time in chapter 5. It would seem that these uncontrolled passions are a widespread problem in the church, and they're ongoing. And Paul says, you need to stop.

This is not how Christians behave. And again, he gives us three reasons why. The first is what it does to Christ, verse 15. It's a really interesting argument the way he brings this together. What it does to Christ. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never. And verse 17, but he who is joined in the Lord becomes one spirit with him. When you put your faith in the Lord Jesus, you are united to him in a spiritual union such that the Bible speaks of you as a member of Christ. And what that means, to put it most bluntly, is wherever you go, Christ goes with you. When you get into bed

with someone, there's a sense in which Christ is with you. For the most part, sexual sin happens in secret. But if you're a Christian, that's not the case. If you're a Christian, you take Christ with you. And Paul says, don't do it. When you think about it like that, of course, never. The Christian has been set apart to honor Christ, not to demean him in this way. Christ has no place in the company of prostitutes. No place in illicit sexual situations. And because you're united to him, neither do you. That's Paul's argument. If the first problem then is what it does to Christ, and it's jarring when we think about it in the way he's describing it here, the second is what it does to you. Verse 18, flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. All sin, there's a sense in which all sin is the same in as much as it cuts us off from God, and insofar as the cross and resurrection of Jesus are sufficient to deal with it.

So there is no sin that God overlooks, and there is no sin, if confessed, cannot be covered by Christ's blood. Do you hear that? We can't downplay sin in any way, and we can't ever think that there is a sin that if we confess it that it's too big for God to deal with. However, Paul clearly demonstrates here that sexual sin is uniquely serious. So do you see he has every other sin in one category, and then sexual sin in another. And that is because he says it is a sin against the body. Your body matters to God. It is your body that is united to Christ and destined for resurrection, verse 14. You see, he talks about us being raised. And the reason sexual sin is so serious is because of the depth and power that God has bestowed on the sexual union. Paul goes back to the beginning, verse 16. He quotes from Genesis 2, where God's design for sex is explained, two will become one flesh. A man and a woman come together, and they become one, not just physically in the act, but in some mysterious, deeper, whole person kind of way. You say, okay, but surely drunkenness, greed, those kinds of sins that are mentioned in 9 and 10, they're sins against the body as well. They're not good for you physically. But those sins, in God's design, do not have the capacity to make you one flesh with the food or the alcohol. The one flesh union only applies when two people have sex. That's God's design.

[23:33] And it's unavoidably God's design. No matter how transactional someone tells you it is for them, it isn't. There is no such thing as just sex because of the weight and significance that God has invested in this union. And whatever you believe this morning, can I say you cannot avoid this.

This is not simply a Christian thing. It is a human thing. Sex is serious. It is weighty. It changes you. And so when you take it outside the parameters that God has put in place, it damages you. Often hear the analogy of fire. It is like fire. Inside the hearth, fire is a beautiful thing. It is warm. It is productive. It is good. Outside the hearth, it destroys everything that it touches. And that, verse 18, is why Paul says flee. It's a sense of urgency. Can I say that? If you're caught in some kind of sexual sin this morning, can I say one word? Flee. Get out. Get the fire brigade out and stay out. Not just because it's personally destructive, but look at verse 19. Because of how out of step it is with who you are. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God with your body. When God saves you, He stamps you with His Holy Spirit. He stamps your body with His Spirit. Think about it. Where does the Spirit dwell in God's people? In our bodies. Think about it. We know that God's Spirit lives in us. Where? In our soul? Yes. In our heart? Yes. But our hearts and our souls are enfleshed. They're not separate from our bodies. We are physical embodied beings, and it is in those bodies that God's Spirit dwells. God is present in your body because that is where you are. Your mind can be in a million different places. Your body is only ever in one place, and God's Spirit is there. And what that means is your bodies are sacred. You were sanctified, remember. You were set apart for God. And sexual sin, Paul says, defiles this temple. It is an offense against the Holy Spirit within you. To put it in the simplest terms, if you profess to follow Jesus, your body belongs to God, and you should not defile the temple with sexual sin. It is out of step with who you've been made to be. When someone lets you use something that belongs to them, and they lend you something, you take extra care with it because it's not yours. You don't want to damage it because it belongs to someone else. And we should think this way about our bodies. Our bodies do not ultimately belong to us, so we should treat them with the kind of care that the owner would want. We use them how he would want, and we make the kind of decisions that he would approve of. In short, we should glorify him in our bodies. Let me just say two things as we

close. The first is this. I want to remind you who it is that Paul is addressing. He is speaking to a church that has allowed the unchecked pride and uncontrolled passions of their former lives to come with them into Christ. Now, that comes naturally to us.

[27:03] We're ingrained in patterns of thought and in patterns of living, and when we come to Christ, we don't just stop. Those temptations still exist. But however naturally it comes to us, it's not okay. And if that's you, I hope you can hear this rebuke and repent. And I say that to you because there is grace for you. There is grace for you, but you need to turn from these things because they don't belong with who you now are in Christ.

And here's the second thing I want to say. I know how hard the things that Paul is discussing here can be for us to hear. The shame and the guilt of past sin and its consequences can hang around for a long time.

So let me take you back to verse 11. Here is where I want us to land this morning. I want to remind us of what comes to us in Christ. Paul describes categories of every kind of sin, and then he says, 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. Here's what I want you to hear above everything else this morning. Christ has mercy for sinners of every kind. When you come to Him, you are cleansed. The sin that you committed, the sin that was committed against you has been washed away. And that means that you are clean.

As far as God is concerned, you are clean. You're sanctified. You're set apart under His love. His verdict over you is that He loves you in Christ. And you're justified. You're counted righteous before Him. Every single one of your sins has been taken on Christ and thrown to the bottom of the ocean.

[29:02] So however this lands with you this morning, I want you to live in the freedom and the joy of that. The freedom and the joy of the forgiveness and the cleansing and the renewal and the love that we have in Christ. And in the power of the Holy Spirit to go from here and to glorify God with all that you are. Let's pray.