

4. Unlike with his treatment of factions, Paul here fully intended to shame the Corinthians (cf. 4:14, 6:5-6). He wanted them to see the shameful, not of their disputes per se, but of the *thinking* surrounding them and the implications and consequences of it. In the first place, the fact that individuals in the church were taking their brothers to court implied that those individuals were unable to identify any wise ones within the church body – except, of course, *themselves*, who were wise enough to recognize that their disputes were best judged by the worldly “wisdom” of civil courts. Most likely that implication never occurred to those bringing the suits; their action betrayed their preoccupation with prevailing in their grievances, so that they likely reasoned no further than the best avenue for realizing that successful outcome. *But Paul saw the bigger picture and measured the situation at Corinth in terms of the overarching issues of the gospel of Christ and the Corinthians’ participation in Him.* There were many reasons for those involved in these suits to be ashamed, and Paul highlighted four of them:
- a. The first and most obvious reason for being ashamed was that those bringing these civil suits were guilty of wronging and defrauding *their brothers* (6:8). The context suggests that Paul was assigning wrongfulness first to the *action* of taking a personal dispute before a court of unbelievers rather than resolving it in the Church. He was thus saying to the Corinthians that handling disputes in this way rendered the suing party guilty of wronging and defrauding his brother, *regardless of whether that brother was himself guilty of any wrongdoing.*
  - b. But Paul was also no doubt alluding to the *fleshly thinking* behind such lawsuits. This points to the second reason for shame, namely that the suing parties were wronging and defrauding *themselves*. Anyone bringing a civil suit does so because he has the expectation he will succeed in court; otherwise, why incur the trouble and expense? And he is confident of prevailing either because he’s convinced he’s in the right or because he believes he can move the court to rule in his favor. In the case of the former, the person trusts in the court’s wisdom and integrity; in the case of the latter, he trusts in his own capabilities and resource. The former exalts worldly justice while the latter scorns it. *The fact that the suing party is a Christian doesn’t necessarily preclude these dynamics, and where they are present the wrong and fraud are exacerbated.*
    - In the scenario where the suing Christian believes he’ll prevail because he’s in the right, he isn’t simply placing undue confidence in civil justice; he’s exalting worldly wisdom and righteousness over their spiritual counterparts. Does he really trust unbelievers more than the saints to discern, honor and vindicate the truth? The Christian implies just that when he seeks justice in court rather than in the Church (vv. 1-6).
    - The violation is obviously even worse in the case of a believer bringing a suit against his brother because he thinks he can manipulate the court. If the preceding scenario finds the suing Christian guilty of wrong and fraud toward his brother, the latter enlarges the violation to include wronging and defrauding the court itself.

- c. The third reason is an extension of the previous two, which is that these lawsuits reached beyond the persons involved; they were wronging and defrauding *the whole Church*. The Church's life is to be one of unity and harmony; when one member suffers the whole body suffers; when one is honored and made to rejoice, so does the whole (12:12-27; esp. vv. 24-27). It is in this context of unity and harmony that the Church is built up in Christ – that the body actually causes the growth of the body (Ephesians 4:1-16). In God's economy and esteem, the individual believer cannot be regarded except in connection with the corporate *ecclesia*. Just as it was with Israel, the sin of the one (or the few) undermines, weakens, defiles and corrupts the whole, bringing the whole body under God's judgment if not addressed (ref. again 5:1-8). This way of handling disputes wronged and defrauded the individual litigants – those bringing the suits as well as those being sued, but the wrong and fraud equally impacted the whole church.
- d. The fourth reason for their shame is less obvious, but it is embedded within Paul's reprimand in verse 7. This concerns the Church's outward witness – specifically the fact that these lawsuits were bearing false testimony regarding Jesus and His gospel. By handling their disputes this way, the Corinthians were wronging and defrauding *the unbelieving world*. Three observations make this apparent:
- 1) The first is Paul's remark that the plaintiffs in these suits suffered *defeat* in them simply by taking their disputes with a brother before a civil court. Some scholars go further, arguing that Paul was assigning this defeat to the mere fact of grievances among the saints; Christians should be above disputes as they act in love. But this exceeds Paul's language and his concern with *how* believers resolve disputes, not the fact they have them.
  - 2) Paul further illumined his meaning by indicating that this defeat came even to those who were in the *right* in their grievance. It's noteworthy that Paul wasn't the least concerned about the particular matters in dispute, who was actually in the right, or who prevailed in the process of adjudication. In his judgment those issues were irrelevant; *what mattered was the truth of the life and mind of Christ in His people and their true witness to Him and His gospel among themselves and in the world*.
  - 3) From Paul's vantage point, even if a grievance was sound and justice prevailed so that the plaintiff won his case without having to resort to any sort of unethical maneuver, that individual still suffered defeat. Win or lose, handling disputes in this way constituted a failure that resulted in defeat – defeat not just for the suing party, but for the authentic, accurate witness to Christ and His gospel in the Church and before unbelievers. This is the reason Paul contended that it would be better to be wronged and defrauded than to be vindicated in this way.

*And so here again, in the instance of the Corinthians' legal disputes, the antithesis between the natural mind and the mind of the Spirit comes into sharp relief.*

- The natural mind recognizes that God is concerned with truth, and so reasons that He must surely be pleased when one of His children is shown to be in the right in a dispute. How could God be pleased when wrongfulness prevails? Though He might prefer that disputes be mediated in the Church rather than by an outside tribunal, in the end what concerns God most is that the truth is vindicated.
- The spiritual mind likewise acknowledges God's concern for and commitment to truth, but it understands it from a different vantage point: It considers issues, situations and circumstances from an all-encompassing, spiritual perspective. That is to say, the spiritual mind examines and judges the matters of this life through the proper lens, which is the spiritual, *eschatological* one.

Those whose minds are governed by the Spirit recognize that truth is a matter of meaning, and meaning is determined by God, not human perception and judgment. And God assigns the meaning of a thing or situation, not by considering the thing or situation in itself, but in terms of its relationship to all other things as everything fits together and works together toward His full accomplishment of His design for His creation in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:9-10). *Stated simply, the meaning of anything – and therefore the ultimate truth of that thing – is a matter of eschatology*; it's a matter of God's revelation and realization in Jesus Christ and their import for the creation in all of its myriad components, features, aspects and dynamics of interrelatedness.

Whatever the thing, situation or circumstance, its true meaning is determined by its relation to God and His accomplishment and final purpose for His creation in Christ. *Any other "meaning" is necessarily false*. So it is that the natural mind can assess a thing as it appears in itself, and, in this way, arrive at a meaning for that thing that is functional at the level of a narrow, isolated consideration. But lacking an eschatological and christological grid, the natural mind can go no further; it cannot determine true meaning.

So here Paul recognized that the matter of truth and righteousness in the Corinthian disputes (as all their issues) vastly transcended the particulars wrapped up in those disputes. Truth and righteousness respecting their disputes weren't determined by factual or legal rightness, but by how those disputes were viewed and handled in light of the larger, determinative concerns raised by eschatology – by the truth as it is in Jesus Christ and the responsibilities and obligations it imposes upon His saints. This is why Paul was unconcerned with the details and outcomes of their disputes; his only concern was that the truth of Christ and His gospel be honored and upheld in the Church and the world.

Thus the issue isn't whether God is concerned about truth and righteousness. *The issue is how truth and righteousness are determined and who determines them*. God determines them, and He does so rightly because He perceives and judges each individual thing organically – not as that thing appears in itself, but as it exists and functions within an all-encompassing, intricately interrelated whole. The meaning and truth of any given part is bound up in the whole. (Again, truth and meaning are a matter of eschatology). This is true of biblical revelation, and it is true of the particulars of creaturely existence – whether a jigsaw puzzle or the innumerable features and details of a human life.

So it was true of the Corinthians' disputes with one another: God's concern with truth in this instance looked beyond the specifics of a particular matter of contention to how that dispute fit into the overarching and defining eschatology, its outworking and fruitfulness in the world, and its final consummation. *This explains how a person can be factually and legally in the right and yet be wrong before the bar of God's justice; it explains how the God of truth can ascribe falseness and guilt to the vindication of truth.*

5. To the natural mind, this sort of reasoning appears illogical and absurd. But to the spiritual man – the man informed and led by the Spirit, this all makes perfect sense. He is able to see with Christ's eyes and perspective; he can see beyond that which appears to the senses and natural intellect; indeed he judges the natural in the light of the eternal – in light of the reality of the new creation that exists in and through Jesus Christ. And being able to see beyond what is seen (2 Corinthians 4:16-18), the spiritual man is no longer constrained to be a *grasping* creature: a creature whose existence is defined and driven by the insatiable self-seeking inherent in a self-referential perspective on all things.

Paul highlighted this truth with his summary commentary in verses 9:9-11. At first glance this passage may appear to change the subject, but it actually focuses Paul's preceding discussion. This is evident from his use of the conjunction *or* to introduce the passage. This conjunction correlates what precedes and follows in the sense of indicating a critical implication of the Corinthian lawsuits. *By taking their brethren before unbelievers, these individuals were effectively denying their participation in Christ.*

Again, the natural man is a grasping (self-seeking) man: He views everything and everyone in terms of its perceived value to him; he is a creature who cannot see the forest for the "trees" of self-derived, self-orbiting perception, judgment, and interest. Paul saw this quality of the natural man reflected in the Corinthians' lawsuits – even in their insistence on being proven in the right. The natural man is a self-enslaved, grasping creature, but Jesus had delivered the Corinthians from that "dominion" and brought them into His kingdom of the new creation. Therefore, for them to continue in the patterns of their former enslavement was to lie against the truth. Thus Paul's meaning:

*"By your lawsuits you wrong and defraud your brethren, aligning yourselves with the unrighteous, not only in seeking and deferring to their judgment as natural-minded men (6:1), but in following the leading of your own natural thinking. Don't you know that the unrighteous have no share in the kingdom of God? Stop deceiving yourselves. You once were such men, driven and enslaved by the grasping passions of the natural mind, but you were washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of Jesus and in the Spirit of God."*

Keeping this passage in its context is critically important, especially in light of the tendency to treat it as a discrete passage treating a fresh topic. For many, verses 9-11 serve as a Christian assurance proof-text: a biblical litmus text for determining whether or not an individual is really saved (and so also a practical prescription for living the Christian life). But to view it in that way is to strip away its context and so miss Paul's actual meaning. This passage must be interpreted within Paul's larger argument, and when that's done several important observations emerge:

- a. The first pertains to what has already been mentioned, namely Paul’s catalog of sins. Again, Paul’s design wasn’t to provide a list of behaviors as a salvation litmus test, but to broadly portray the characteristic pattern of the natural man as a grasping creature. Paul’s palate highlights man’s fundamental *sensuality* – the fact that his existence in this world is informed and driven by his natural cravings (even spiritual cravings, which the natural mind also strives to gratify; Colossians 2:1-23). Maslow postulated this in his “hierarchy of needs,” but only as an echo of what Jesus had asserted on a Galilean hillside two millennia earlier (Matthew 6:19-34): *The natural man is a self-seeking creature consumed with self-gratification, even in the “spiritual” attainments of doing and being “right.”*
- b. Second, Paul contrasted his graphic portrayal of the natural man with the reversal which God has effected in Jesus Christ – the creational purging and renewal which the Corinthian believers themselves were partakers in. Though they were all once natural men (even if not personally guilty of any of the specific manifestations Paul mentioned: “such were *some* of you”), the Corinthians had been *washed, sanctified, and justified*.

Interestingly, the first thing some notice about Paul’s declaration is the order in which he presented his verbs. The reason is that Paul’s order raises a question for those who think in the classical categories of justification and sanctification in which the former logically, soteriologically and actually precedes the latter. This is the case because justification is regarded as positional and instantaneous while sanctification is practical and ongoing: A person is justified (reckoned as righteous) at the moment he puts his faith in Christ; having now been justified, he begins the process of sanctification in which he progressively grows in his actual holiness and Christ-likeness. Treated this way, sanctification follows upon and necessarily presupposes justification.

When a person comes to Paul’s statement with this *a priori* assumption regarding justification and sanctification, he instantly notices Paul’s apparent transposition of the terms and feels the need to resolve it. There are scholars eager to help, and Matthew Henry’s answer is generally representative: “*Here is a rhetorical change of the natural order: You are sanctified, you are justified. Sanctification is mentioned before justification: and yet the name of Christ, by which we are justified, is placed before the Spirit of God, by whom we are sanctified.*”

But when these three ideas are understood more precisely in terms of their biblical meaning, one discovers a beauty and perfection in Paul’s order:

First, the verb rendered *wash* occurs only here in Paul’s writing. In its only other occurrence Luke associated it with the ritual of baptism (Acts 22:16). It is a compounded form of a particular verb, and this compounding highlights the notion of purging from the impurity and defilement of sin (“wash *away*,” as compared with the more general idea conveyed by the uncompounded verb – ref. John 13:10; Acts 9:37, 16:33; Hebrews 10:22; 2 Peter 2:22).

The verb rendered *sanctify* is common throughout the Scripture. In all of its various cognates it is concerned with the idea of *holiness*, even when used in reference to God's people as His "holy ones" (*saints*). But fundamental to this notion of holiness (sanctification) is the principle of consecration: Created things are holy, not because of what they are in themselves or what they do, *but because God has taken them to be His own possession* – so the sanctuary and its servants, implements and rituals (Exodus 24-31); so the land of Canaan (Exodus 15:13); so God's people (Deuteronomy 7:1-6, 14:1-2; cf. Exodus 19:5-6; 1 Peter 2:9).

David Peterson observes: "*Just as Israel was made holy [sanctified] by God's saving action in the time of Moses, and again in the restoration after the Babylonian Exile, so sanctification in the New Testament is an integral part of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. It is regularly [indeed, foremost] portrayed as a once-for-all, definitive act and primarily has to do with the holy status or position of those who are 'in Christ.'*"

The verb *justified* is the most challenging for linguistic, doctrinal, and traditional reasons. Apart from the linguistic complexity and nuance of this one Greek root and its cognates, the formalization of the doctrine of justification has tended to isolate the concept from its biblical context. While rightly treated as a forensic concept, it is often divorced from its covenantal, eschatological and christological framework. In terms of its law court connotation, "being justified" is depicted in the action of a judge declaring the accused to be in the right. As such, it says nothing per se about *being* right in oneself, *doing* right, or *becoming* right. True, God is "justified" in the sense that He *is* right and *does* right – particularly in that His actions always conform to His word. God is justified by His faithfulness, but this sense of "being justified" flows from the character of God, not the verb itself.

- c. The meaning of these three verbs illumines Paul's reason for ordering them as he did, but his rationale becomes all the more clear when one considers his final qualification: "... *in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God*" (6:11c). Paul ascribed the Corinthians' cleansing, consecration and justification to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, not to the exclusion of the Father (note the *Spirit of our God*), but because the Son and Spirit are the *effectual agents* of the triune God's purpose for man, and beyond him, the whole creation. The accomplishment of the divine purpose – summarized in Paul's three verbs – is *in* the Lord Jesus Christ, who is both the Creator unto the creature and the creature unto the Creator. And precisely because this creational work is a matter of renewal and perfection – a matter of *life out of death* – it is a work done *by* the life-giving Spirit (cf. Genesis 1:1ff; Romans 8:1-11; 2 Corinthians 3:1-4:6).

Paul's concern in the Corinthians' legal disputes lay in what they implied. The offenders were aligning with the unrighteous, not by their lawsuits per se, *but by acting as if they were yet "mere men."* They were acting as natural men, and so denying that, in Christ by His Spirit, they'd been *cleansed* from their sin, delivered from their alienation and *sanctified* (set apart) as God's own. And being restored to the Father in the Son, they were *justified* – given the full status of sons.