

Living in Grace-World

1 Corinthians 6:1-8

Good morning, my name is Michael Tourtellotte, I'm one of the pastors here at EBC, and it's good to be with you all this morning. We'll be picking up our series in 1 Corinthians at chapter 6 this morning, which you can find on page 897 of one of the pew Bibles. As Pastor Brad said a couple weeks ago, if you don't have a Bible of your own, we'd encourage you to take one of the pew Bibles home with you as our gift to you. We'll be looking at verses 1-8 of chapter 6 today.

Recently, I had the pleasure of having lunch with Kerry Stroupe, and our conversation was my favorite kind: the kind that focuses on the incredible blessing of living in gracious relationship with Jesus in His Kingdom. Conversations like those are some of my favorite times of worship. And during our conversation Kerry spoke of following Jesus as living in "Grace-World". I love that phrase, as it captures a chief aspect of what it means to live as a citizen of Christ's Kingdom, which is that Christ's Kingdom operates on the principle of grace. This means that Grace-World is fundamentally different than the world as we commonly experience it, or what we may call Law-World.

It is this fundamental difference between Grace-World and Law-World that can make some of what Jesus and the Bible calls Christians to seem so jarring. For instance, we preached through the Gospel of Matthew and few years ago, and titled that whole series "The Upside-Down Kingdom", because the Kingdom of God presented in that Gospel is directly opposite of the kingdom of the world in so many ways. Consider some of what Jesus says in the Sermon on the mount.

To begin with, here is who he called "blessed": the poor in spirit, mourners, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. That's a very different list than the average person would put together.

Then He says the righteousness of citizens of the kingdom will exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. In case you're unfamiliar with who the scribe and Pharisees were, they were the most religiously strict Jews of the 1st century. According to the standard of the Mosaic law, they were the most righteous, but Jesus says His followers' righteousness would exceed theirs, and then he goes on to give examples of what that might look like.

For instance, beyond avoiding murder as the Mosaic law prescribes, Kingdom citizens will avoid anger. Beyond avoiding adultery, they will avoid lust. They will be absolutely faithful. They will bless when they are hurt and give when they are asked. They will love their enemies. And we could go on with how Jesus calls his followers to practice their religion humbly, forgo storing up earthly possessions, trust God completely, and treat others like they want to be treated. I don't know about you, but that is a very different world than the one with which I'm familiar.

Paul has been presenting a similarly alternative approach to life in 1 Corinthians so far. Pastor Grant taught us earlier in our series that the Corinthians revered the warrior and the sage. These were the archetypes of Corinthian, and more broadly, of Greek society. Such figures as Alexander the Great embodied the warrior. And philosophers like Plato and Aristotle embodied the sage.

But Paul has made a point to contrast the way of Jesus with these two ideals. In contrast to the power of a warrior, he preaches Jesus Christ crucified, and calls that message "the power of God". In contrast to the sage, he says that the preaching of Christ crucified is "folly to the Gentiles", that is, to the secular world, but he calls it the wisdom of God.

You can see that Paul, like Jesus, is preaching the message of an upside-down kingdom. Or, more accurately, he's preaching the message of the right-side-up kingdom. Because it is not the Kingdom of God that is upside-down, but the kingdom of our world. It is because we have spent our lives living upside-down that makes the law of grace that governs Christ's Kingdom feel so unnatural, but it is, in fact, the true representation of reality.

Those who know me are well-aware that I love stories. I particularly love fantasy stories like *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Naria*. The fact that I'm a fantasy nerd is probably not surprising to you, but what may surprise you is that I have found reading such stories to be helpful to me in my approach to reading the Bible.

You see, these stories invite the reader to imagine a world that is vastly different than our own. And the goal of the reader is to inhabit that world with their imagination; to place themselves within the story. The more the reader does this, the more his or her understanding of the fantasy world is expanded and the more the story of that world makes sense, which helps them imaginatively inhabit the world more deeply, and so on.

I think this is exactly what should be happening as we read the Bible. As I've said, the reality the biblical story presents often seems foreign to us. And so, we must employ our imaginations to understand the reality the Bible presents, because that reality is so often absent from our experience. To live the Christian life, to live in the Kingdom, to live in Grace-World, we must first imagine it, based largely on what we see in Scripture. Not because the Kingdom is an imaginary place, but because it is true reality. The problem is we're living in an upside-down kingdom, and that makes reality seem fantastic or foolish.

I bring all this up, because the passage we're going to look at today is going to call us to a way of living and relating to one another that will likely strike us as foolish or unrealistic at first. So, going into it, I want you to know that Paul is not calling us to a fantasy but reality; he's not calling us to folly, but to the wisdom of God.

To give you an idea of how we're going to approach this passage, we're going to read the passage in its entirety, and then break it down thematically, based on the issues Paul addressed. I think this will be the clearest way understand the text, rather taking a verse at a time sequentially, because Paul tends to weave the points he's making together in this passage. So, let's read our passage.

“When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or 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? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers!”

The long and short of the problem here is that the Corinthian believers were apparently suing one another over civil disputes in the Roman courts. Hopefully, this strikes you as obviously problematic, but we're going to examine the three reasons this situation was so troubling to Paul, beginning with the problem of the Corinthian Christians taking their disputes to non-Christian judges.

In the Greek, the first word in this passage is “dare”. Paul does this to emphasize that point and inject a note of incredulity; he can’t believe the Corinthians are behaving in this way. Verse 1 might be better read, “Dare he go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints, the one of you who has a grievance against another?” However, you organize the sentence, you can hear Paul’s disbelief. There are a number of reasons that could contribute to his disappointment.

First, there’s the distinct possibility that this issue is related to the Corinthians’ preoccupation with status, as the Roman courts tended to favor those of higher standing. Paul has already attacked the Corinthians’ tendency to elevate certain people over others and argue about who is better than who, and he will continue to attack this status mongering later in the letter as well. So, part of Paul’s tone may come from the fact that the richer, more prominent members of the Corinthian church are taking advantage of their brothers by going to judges who are biased toward them.

Second, another possible reason Paul sees this practice as great folly is that the Roman courts were often corrupt, which, of course, goes along with the point I just made about them favoring those of higher societal standing. There was no guarantee that the Corinthians were going to get justice even according to earthly standards, much less Christian standards. And that last bit is the point with which Paul takes the most explicit issue. Even if the Roman courts weren’t favoring those of high standing over those of low, or perpetrating some other form of corruption, they still were judging based on a different law.

This is going to be the theme of all the problems we look at in this passage: each problem represents a rejection of living according to the law of grace which governs Christ’s Kingdom. Ironically, the Christians had a good example in the Jews for what they should have been doing. The Jews had long had the Sanhedrin, which was the judicial counsel that rendered judgements according to the Mosaic law. This council operated even during the time they were ruled by the Romans. And the reason for this was clear: Jewish law was different than Roman law. If that was true of Jewish law, how much more should the Christians have recognized that they were governed by a different law than the Romans, making the Roman courts unfit to judge their disputes?

What was so troubling to Paul was that the Corinthians were either ignorant of the fact that they had a different governing law than the Romans, or they were knowingly rejecting the law of grace by which they had settled their dispute with God. Either way, it was not good. The next problem Paul addresses is their inability to judge their disputes for themselves.

The phrase “do you not know” occurs six times in chapter 6. Paul is attacking the Corinthians’ high opinion of their own wisdom by alluding to the fact that they can’t even judge on trivial matters and see to be ignorant of a lot that should be common knowledge. Such as the fact that Christians will one day judge the world and angels. Paul seems to have considered this reality common knowledge, though it is more obscure for us.

However, there is biblical evidence that at least some believers will be called to judge on God’s behalf in some capacity. For instance, Matthew 19:28 reads, “Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.’”

-Similarly, in Luke 22:28-30 Jesus says, “You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

As a sidenote, we may see what led Paul to universalize Christians judging the world in general. In these first two passages, who is Jesus talking to? His twelve disciples, who were Jewish men that had become his followers. And who are they going to judge specifically? Israel. Which makes sense, right? Men from the nation of Israel who had come to follow Jesus would make decent judges of that nation. So, according to that reasoning, who would be fit to judge America, or Sweden, or Japan? Christians from those nations, seems reasonable. That's just my own reflection, so take it for what it's worth, but it could offer some rationale behind Paul's statements about Christians judging on God's behalf more broadly. Along those lines Revelation 20:4a is more general, as John reports, "Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed."

Paul brings up this reality that at least some Christians will be called to judge eternal matters, in order to chastise the Corinthians for not being able to judge the simpler matters of mortal life. The matters in question were not criminal, but rather civil of some sort or another. This all paints the Corinthians in a rather childish light, and Paul is the exasperated parent saying, "You should be able to figure this out yourselves!"

The climax of his disapproval is heard in the phrase translated, "I say this to your shame." It's important to understand that this is an honor-shame society, so this indictment would have hit the Corinthians quite a bit harder than it probably hits us. In such cultures, shame is to avoided at all costs, and so Paul is essentially saying that what they are doing is the worst thing they could possibly do. In fact, I think it's possible, based on Paul's language, that he's actually more disturbed by what's going on in this passage than he was with the situation we looked at last week, with the man sleeping with his stepmother.

Greg Hoffman reminded me last week that in 2 Corinthians 2 Paul alludes to having caused the Corinthians pain in a previous letter, and this is probably one of those instances he had in mind. It's important to understand that Paul views himself as a spiritual father to the Corinthians, as he calls himself in chapter 4. That continues to be implied with all the familial language that he uses in these passages. And you can hear it in 2 Corinthians 2:4 when he says, "I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you." So, as we saw in our passage last week, Paul is calling the Corinthians to the hard things, not because he hates them, but because he loves them, and he wants them to walk in a manner worthy of their calling in Christ. But there is no doubt that this rebuke would have left a mark. So, there was the problem of going to outside judges, the problem of not being able to judge for themselves, and finally Paul brings us the problem of the lawsuits themselves.

If you remember from last week's passage, part of why Paul was so concerned about unrepentant sin in the church was because it perpetuated a misrepresentation of the Gospel. Hopefully you also can recall from our Acts preaching series how driven Paul was by the preaching of the Gospel. This passion of his underlies a ton of his writing, including this letter to the Corinthians.

You can hear this underlying concern for the Gospel when he says, "...brother goes to law against brother, *and that before unbelievers.*" Paul is worried about how the Gospel will be perceived by these unbelievers. He's worried about what this practice is doing to the witness of the church. What are unbelievers to think when Christians sue one another? How is that any different than the rest of the world? Why would they think Christianity had anything different to offer them? The Corinthians are acting just like the rest of Roman society, even to the point of wronging and

defrauding fellow believers, with those believers retaliating in kind. It's a really bad look, and not at all a win for the Gospel and the Kingdom, in fact, Paul says explicitly it is a defeat.

This says something about the Corinthians' priorities, which brings us to maybe the most extreme call of the passage. Paul asks them, "Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?" This is one of those jarring statements we run across in the Bible. But if the priority is bearing witness to the Gospel, then, of course, we should be willing to suffer wrong at times.

However, if we're honest, at least I know if I am, an answer to Paul's question tends to come to me fairly quickly, and it goes something like this: "Because it's wrong Paul! It's not fair! For crying out loud, it's sin!" To which Paul answers, in my imaginary conversation with him, "Yeah, so? Didn't Jesus give us a way to deal with sin? And wasn't His way the way of grace, not of retribution?" At which point my inner voice falls silent.

It is at such points that I know I must decide whether or not I actually want to live in Christ's Kingdom. You know, we speak of grace in church as if it were never offensive, but in practice grace is often offensive to us. Because grace doesn't just mean our sins are forgiven, it means our worst enemy's sins are forgiven as well, if they turn to Jesus, at which point we really don't have any grounds to hold onto their sin against us. God's way is the way of grace that offers forgiveness of sin by the blood of Jesus, and we don't get to sign up to receive that grace without signing up to give it.

The Gospels regularly describe Jesus as preaching "the gospel of the kingdom of God". The Gospel is about a King who has established a Kingdom, a Kingdom governed by grace. Any who would live in that Kingdom, must live according to its law, the law of grace. Just as we saw last week, underlying this issue with the Corinthians is a misunderstanding, misapplication, or ignorance of the Gospel. They had received forgiveness from God. So, clearly wronging one another and retaliation should not have been an option.

They had agreed to live in the Kingdom where you turn the other cheek when you are struck, where you give your cloak also to the one who sues for your tunic, where you go two miles with the one who forces you to go with them one. Lest you think Jesus was just talking in the abstract, let's read 1 Peter 2:21-23. "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly." To this the Corinthians had been called, not in the abstract, but in the actual. The only question was: did they want to live in Grace-world or Law-world, the Kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of the earth?

Notice too how the call of this passage militates against the Corinthian obsession with the warrior and the sage. Paul calls the Corinthians to give up their rights and be wronged, which seems patently weak and foolish by earthly standards. But this is, in fact, another example and outworking of the wisdom and power of God, which holds the potential to transform the world utterly for the good. I need no argument to claim that the world would be improved to the point of being unrecognizable were we able to suddenly remove all wronging and defrauding of one another from it. If those things didn't exist, there wouldn't be much sin left, relatively speaking.

And you should know, that is the Kingdom of Jesus! In His Kingdom, those things don't exist. and only those who live according to that law, who sign up to submit to that way of life will be granted entrance into that Kingdom, as Paul will say in the very next verses. So, here's our main idea: As recipients of God's grace in Christ Jesus, Christians are called to settle disputes according

to the Kingdom's law of grace; thereby, actualizing the Kingdom in their own lives and displaying its reality to unbelievers.

A couple points of application. First, as a general challenge, grow in concrete faith. The Bible really doesn't deal in faith that stays abstract. What I mean is that the Bible doesn't deal in faith that says loving our enemies is a nice idea, but never actually seeks the good of the one who hates us. Faith, biblically, always shows itself in concrete ways, as this is really the only way to know whether or not you truly have faith in a thing. Faith in a chair is shown by sitting in it, to say you trust a chair but refuse to ever sit in it would call your faith into question.

And so it is with faith in Jesus. To say we believe Jesus has forgiven all the wrong we've done by His grace and that He has made that grace available to the whole world, but then refuse to be forgiving calls our professed faith into question. In the end, perhaps this shows that we trust our lawyers to get us what's right more than we trust Jesus. Similarly, to say we believe Jesus taught the way to live, but then refuse to, for instance, actually seek the good of our enemies calls our professed belief in the way of Jesus into question. So, the same question that was implicitly asked of the Corinthians is asked of all Christians: do we really want to live in Grace-world? If we do, then we must seek to live by its law of grace in practical ways.

Which leads to the second, more specific point of application, learn to bear wrongdoing. I imagine one question a lot of people ask when they read this passage is, "Does Paul literally mean the Corinthians should allow themselves to be wronged and defrauded?" Let me give you my answer to that question: yes. Does this mean that Christians will never go to court, not necessarily. But I think Paul saw a marvelous opportunity for the Gospel to become practical and was encouraging the Corinthians to take it. And generally speaking, I would encourage you to do the same.

In Philippians 3:10 one of the ways Paul talks about coming to know Jesus more is by sharing or having fellowship with Christ in His sufferings. Paul saw suffering with, for, and in like manner to Jesus as a way of getting to know Him better. When you bear suffering with grace as Jesus did, you come to learn a lot about Him. You come to understand the level of love, humility, and sacrifice it took for Him to suffer for you. You also get the pleasure of experiencing the way grace disrupts the brokenness of the world, perhaps you might even get to experience the miracle of seeing an enemy become a friend and a sibling in Christ, just as Jesus has experienced.

Do you know what the New Testament's consistently tells Christians to do when they encounter suffering? Rejoice! Matthew 5:12, Romans 5:3, James 1:2, and more all say this. Suffering of any kind is an opportunity to get to know Jesus better and to bear witness to the reality of the Kingdom in a unique way. Don't miss your opportunities. Learn to bear and even rejoice in being wronged.

After all, it was for *joy* that Jesus endured the ultimate wrongdoing. We have each wronged Jesus in a thousand ways, and yet He did not respond by taking us to law, but by extending us grace, bearing in Himself the just punishment our wrongdoing deserved, so that we might be offered entrance into that world of grace, which is what the celebration of the Lord's Table is all about.