Identity, Conduct, Christ
1 Cor 6:1-11

A number of our societies, at least in the West, are increasingly polarised. And amongst a number of things, identity - how you see yourself and others, *and* what the good life looks like, what makes for human thriving - play a part in that. Because if you can't agree on those things, if people see what they most value, or what they're after in life, or who they seem themselves as, being attacked, they tend to attack back.

And today's passage speaks to that, because it's about two men, two Christians sadly, going to court against each other. And think, why do people go to court? To win. To be vindicated. To have their rights asserted. To have what they think makes for human thriving, the good life, protected. The same issues underneath much of what's going on in our societies.

But they're also the issues behind why these two men went to court. But in dealing with them, Paul doesn't just critique the two men, he widens his response to the whole church. Which means that this has something to tell us about how we see the good life, and where we get our identity from, and how we should respond when that's under threat.

Identity Matters
Now, Paul's tone here is sharp, isn't it? Look at v1: 'When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints?' He's incredulous, gobsmacked, that two Christians would behave like this. 'What are you thinking?'

Now, why's he so horrified? Because they've taken their personal conflict to the civil magistrates. And the magistrates had their bench, their judgment seat, in the public square. So if these two Christians are slugging it out in court, everyone in Corinth is going to know about it.

And whereas Roman criminal courts had a reputation for being fair, the civil courts had a reputation for being corrupt. In fact, judges expected back-handers. Petronius, the Roman novelist, wrote, 'a lawsuit is nothing more than a public auction' - sold to the highest bidder. Which inevitably meant the courts were biased to the rich.

And so Paul sees such behaviour as a very public defeat - not just for the two men - but for the church: v7: 'To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you.' Win or lose you've all lost.

But the way Paul tackles this is telling, because he does so at the level of their identity. These conflicts are happening among because they haven't thought deeply enough about who they are. You see, if your identity is tied up with success and power, as it was in Corinth; when you think that human thriving, the ultimate good life - or to use Paul's language later - the kingdom - is tied up with wealth and what you have, or reputation and how others see you, or personal freedom and your rights, you're going to fight to maintain those things - even, if necessary, in the courts.

But, Paul says, what they need is to see themselves in a fundamentally different light.

Firstly, they need to understand who they are *now*.

Verse 1 again, 'Does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints?' So Paul draws this line between those inside the church - the saints - and those outside - the unrighteous. Now we hear the word 'saint' and think 'wow, that's a special class of religious person, someone who's been

so good, whose prayers are so holy they even get to wear a halo.' But in the New Testament every Christian's a saint, because by God's kindness and grace, every Christian is made holy and set apart in Christ. And Paul is saying, that's your identity.

And because that's their identity, they're fundamentally different from those outside the church. As we saw a few weeks back, Corinth was full of pagan temples, but these guys are God's temple: the one place that's different, the one place people can encounter the one true God. They're God's alternative community.

But right now they're not exactly looking alternative, are they? 'You're saints, you're righteous in Christ, so why are you airing your dirty laundry before the unrighteous? You're saints, but you're behaving like the world.' And Paul tells them, this is a matter of deep shame for you. It's like the supporter of a football club, turning up to one of their matches wearing their strip, but then cheering every time the side they're playing against scores a goal. It's like you're having an identity crisis, Paul says.

But there's a second dimension of their identity that should influence the way they behave. Look at v5, where Paul says this is 'a dispute between *brothers*.' And v6, 'Brother goes to law against brother.'

Now, imagine a family argument, where everyone falls out over whose turn it is to do the washing up; or who spent more money on whose birthday present; or who left the car with an empty tank. Would you go to court to prove who's right? People would think you're mad. And Paul is saying: you're family, and you don't go to court over trivial family issues.

So it's not just that you're a saint, it's that, within the church, the other person is your brother or sister. And that's should fundamentally change the way you think and speak and deal with them.

But that's exactly where secularism is struggling. Because if as Christians we're to see those in the church as brothers and sisters, we're to see those outside as made in the image of God, worthy of our protection and honour, even when we disagree with them. But what happens when you undermine the idea of everyone as divine image bearers? Then you have to find other reasons to judge people as worthy of honour and protection, or not, - like the opinions they hold, or their conduct, or their values. But what if you don't value their values, or approve their conduct or hold their opinions? Then you lose the ability to see them as inherently worthy of respect and so you stop treating them with respect. As James writes, you 'curse people who are made in the likeness of God.' Remove the foundation of everyone made in the image of God and it's not long before you start talking of those you disagree with as 'deplorable', or 'horrible' people.

So, thirdly, Paul says, Christians are people with their eyes fixed on the future. Look at v2, '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?' In other words, you know how the future is going to work out. You know that in Christ, at the end of time, you're going to reign with him, you're going to inherit the world, so let God's promises be like windows to the future and let what you see seep down into how you live now.'

You see, as a Christian, you can endure loss and suffering in this life, and still praise God, because you know the day is coming when he will wipe away every tear. You can choose not to fight fire

with fire, and return evil for evil because you know that one day justice will be done. And in comparison to the future, these conflicts between you now are trivial, so why go to court? When you know the promises of God, you can sort these issues out between you.

There's a bumper sticker that says, 'He who dies with the most toys wins.' And what you think winning in this life looks like is going to strongly influence how you play, isn't it? So what does it look like for you? What's the goal, the end your life is aiming at? What's your vision of the good life, the kingdom? What will a win look like for you? If it's to be the one with the most stuff, that financial wealth is winning, you're going to fight anyone who tries to take it from you. If it's about your reputation, and coming out on top at the end, you're going to get defensive whenever that's threatened. If it's your personal freedom, you're going to resist anyone trying to pin you down.

But what if it's not. What if winning looks different?

More Important than Winning
Look at v7 again: 'To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you.'

Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader-Ginsburg served on the US supreme court together for years. And ideologically, they were poles apart. They both held very strong and very different beliefs. Scalia was conservative and Bader-Ginsburg the champion of the liberals. And yet, they shared a real and deep friendship. Ginsburg described Scalia as 'her best buddy' - they'd go to the opera together and every year Scalia and his wife and Ginsburg and her husband would spend New Years Eve together. Following Ginsburg's death a few weeks back, Scalia's son Christopher told how, shortly before his dad's death, one of his former clerks Judge Jeffrey Sutton paid him a visit. And Justice Scalia asked him to do him a favour. It was Ginsburg's birthday, and he'd bought her two dozen red roses but was too unwell to take them to her, so he asked Sutton to take them for him. And teasing Scalia, Sutton said, 'now what has all this friendship ever gained you? When was the last time she sided with you in an important 5-4 decision? When did she ever give you her vote?' And he was joking, but Christopher Scalia said his dad took the bait and said "Some things are more important than votes."

Now, if that's true for Supreme Court justices, how much more true should it be for Christians? You see, these two men in Corinth are probably going to court over some financial issue. And the one who's initiated the case feels like he's been defrauded. And he wants to win. He wants to have his money back. And Paul's saying, for a Christian there are more important things than winning and there are worse things than being wronged.

Now how can he say that? Why should this man be willing to be defrauded? Why shouldn't he want to win his case in court?

Only when something is of more value to you than possessions or reputation or freedom. Only when winning looks different to the way the world sees it.

And not retaliating, not responding with anger to anger, is at the heart of Christianity because the cross is at the centre of Christianity. Because at the cross - a total defeat by the world's standards - Christ won the greatest victory. And Jesus was wrongly used, and he gave up his rights, and he suffered undeserved loss, and he was spat on and spoken against, and all he had was taken from

him. And yet, he turned the other cheek, and didn't repay evil for evil. Why? Why did he go through all that? For you, to make you his saint, to bring you into his family, to give you a hope and a future.

And when you know that, when you know he's always turning defeats to victories, and using the weak to shame the strong, you know he's got your back. And that means you can hold your wealth and reputation and freedom much more loosely.

In his book, City of God, Augustine says, 'The only way to fight for safety, is to hold safety in contempt.' The only way to preserve your reputation is not to care about your reputation. The only way to possess true riches is to care less about worldly riches. The only way to experience true freedom is to become Christ's slave. In Jesus's words, if you want to find your life, you've got to lose it. That it's by living for God's glory in this life, even if that means taking the losses, that far greater gains lie ahead.

But… isn't that just a charter for abusers? Doesn't such an ethic simply enable people to do to others whatever they want to do, because they can get away with it?

Behaviour Matters

Verses 9-10: 'Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.'

So, far from a defrauder getting away with it, Paul says 'don't be deceived: the unrighteous face a bleak future. The way you live matters.' And telling us not to be deceived means you can be.

And think how that can happen. The Bible tells us that whether it's sexual immorality, or a driving desire for wealth, or the way you speak of and treat others, how you behave matters. But people will tell you it doesn't. In fact, your own heart may tell you it doesn't.

The socially conservative will see Paul's list here and think, 'exactly, the sexually immoral, adulterers, LGBTQ are on the list and that's right', but become much more defensive when it comes to greed and covetousness. While social liberals will think, 'exactly, that's what's wrong with society: greed, big business, swindlers', but be very hostile to the idea that someone's sexual behaviour gets them on the list. And in our us-against-them culture, the fact that revilers, people who speak abusively or contemptuously of others are also excluded from God's kingdom, should make both conservative and liberal pause.

So what's Paul saying? Well, firstly, notice this is a list of people. People who engage in repeated habits and practices that come to define them, that become their identity. So this is not about one-off failures labelling a person for life. This is about continuing behaviours that become someone's persona, and the Bible says they're incompatible with that person's identity as a Christian - because how you live says something about who you are. It says something about what you think the ultimate good life is, what the kingdom is that you're pursuing.

So look at the list. There are the 'sexually immoral' - those who engage in *porneia,* that generalised term for any sexual relationship outside of heterosexual marriage. There are 'adulterers' - those who have sex with someone other than their husband or wife. There are 'men who practice

homosexuality'. And Paul uses two words there: the first is *malakoi* - meaning 'soft' or 'effeminate' and was used for a boy or a man willingly penetrated by another man. And the second is *arsenokoitai*, the word for a man who has sex with another man. So this is not those struggling with same sex-attraction; it's about those who act on it, who make this their life.

But notice that before Paul gives adulterers and homosexuals as examples of sexual immorality, he first lists 'idolaters' - people who worship false gods. Now why break up the list like that? Because what you worship inevitably influences your behaviour. Make personal freedom, or sex, or pleasure, your god and you're going to act that out.

But then Paul moves to those whose lives are wrapped up with money and wealth: 'thieves', 'the greedy' and 'swindlers'. But this isn't about the rich versus the poor, because it's not just the rich who can be greedy, is it? And greed isn't about the amount you have, it's about the insatiable desire for more that can controls us, it's about using things and people for our own gratification. But living like that also says something about the kingdom, the ultimate good life that person is pursuing.

But notice again that in amongst these identities wrapped around possessing, Paul adds 'drunkards' and 'revilers'. Why? Because it's not just wealth you can covet, but highs, experiences, and you need the next fix to feel alive, and substances offer you that. But so does power, putting others down, treating them with contempt, reviling them, can feel good - at least for a while.

So everyone on the list is looking for that thing they think will give them the life they want. Everyone's looking for what they think is the kingdom. And they think that sex, or substances, or wealth, or power and the kick that comes from putting others down, is the way to get it.

But Paul says, pursue those things and you'll never find what deep down you're really looking for. You'll never enter the kingdom of God.

So how can you? How can you hold wealth and reputation lightly? How can you know that some things are more important than winning? How can you live in a broken world as someone different, without falling into angry self-righteousness?

Know the Gospel

Look at v11. Paul's just listed people who won't inherit the kingdom of God and then he says, 'And such were some of you.' Before you became Christians, Paul says, you could have gone through this list and found yourself. This is what you used to be like. And if that was true for them, isn't it just as true for us? Because we've been sexually immoral, some of us have practised homosexuality, many of us have been covetous, and probably all of us have treated others with contempt.

There's a saying, 'there but for the grace of God go I'. Well, this is much more 'there but for the grace of God *I would still be*.' And reminding yourself, that was my life, that was my identity, I was one of them, and I still feel the pull of those things, means you can't be self-righteous, or hate those who still live like that. Because you didn't escape by somehow sorting yourself out, but because God broke in.

Verse 11 again, 'And 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.' These things used to define you, but now you're forgiven, washed clean. And you've been sanctified, you've been made

holy, a saint, one of God's people; and you've been justified - declared not guilty, and when God looks on you, he doesn't see your past defining you, he sees you in Christ as his beloved son or daughter and he's pleased with you. And it's all because of what Jesus has done *for* you and what the Spirit has done *in* you.

So you don't need to go to court to insist on your rights - you already know what the ultimate court thinks of you. You don't need to make earthly possessions your ultimate and fight to hold on, because in Christ you have far greater riches. You don't need to repay evil with evil, because God repaid your evil with grace. And you don't need to hate and revile those you disagree with because when you were on the other side, God loved you. So you can befriend them.

Know the gospel, Paul is saying. See how it defines you. And then live it out.