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TROUBLING TEXTS
IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Essays in Honour of
Rob van Houwelingen



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HOW TO INHERIT THE KINGDOM OF GOD? FIRST CORINTHIANS 6:1–11 AND KENOTIC SUFFERING THROUGH THE LENS OF HONOUR DISCOURSE

Myriam KLINKER-DE KLERCK

Abstract

Paul's use of a vice list as a stern warning in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 leads to the question of whether the apostle strives for a perfect church. The interpretation that believers who commit these sins will lose their salvation seems to be at odds with the traditional protestant *adagium* of *sola gratia*. I argue that Paul's stern warning has instead a natural function in the apostle's honour discourse aimed at maintaining the Corinthians' commitment to the in-group's definition of honourable behaviour. First, I highlight the honour discourse in the pericope. Second, I show how this honour discourse is aimed at preventing the Corinthians from engaging in civil litigation before local courts of unbelievers, and why. Third, I connect this to Paul's preference for accepting to be harmed as reflecting a cruciform and kenotic spirituality that radically redefines the definition of what is honourable.

Introduction

In his book *Ongemakkelijke teksten van Paulus*, Rob van Houwelingen has a short chapter about the list of vices in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10.¹ In that passage Paul writes to the Corinthians:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. (RSV)

¹ Rob van Houwelingen, "Voor wie is het Koninkrijk?" in *Ongemakkelijke teksten van Paulus*, ed. Rob van Houwelingen and Reinier Sonneveld (Amsterdam: Buijten en Schipperheijn Motief, 2012), 87–89.

“Is Paul striving for a perfect church?” van Houwelingen wonders. “He gives a long list of sinners who will have no part in the kingdom (...) And the reader who does not yet feel himself addressed by this list is told by Paul: ‘Whoever does wrong will have no part in the kingdom of God.’”² The text might indeed suggest that works play a role in determining a Christian’s destiny. The interpretation that believers who commit these sins will lose their salvation dates back to John Wesley and seems to be at odds with the traditional protestant *adagium* of *sola gratia*.³

Pointing to verse 11, van Houwelingen states that, rather than striving for a perfect church, Paul wants to prevent the Corinthians from reverting to their old ways. The apostle strives for a church that continually mirrors God’s holiness and, by consequence, permanently avoids fornication (18a), among other vices. Paul wants the Corinthian Christians to live a life oriented towards God’s kingdom.⁴

I agree with this interpretation. Moreover, I want to reinforce it by showing how Paul’s argument is shaped by the honour discourse of his time. First, I highlight the honour discourse in 1 Corinthians 6:1–11 at a textual level. Second, at the level of socio-historical context, I relate this honour discourse to the question of which specific situation Paul is addressing, and why. Third, working at the level of Paul’s theological reasoning, I ask, “How, then, to inherit the kingdom?” I conclude with some thoughts on the significance of this text for our contemporary context.

Honour Discourse in 1 Corinthians 6:1–11

First Corinthians 6:1–11 forms a subunit in the whole of chapters 5–7. In chapter 5 Paul discusses a case of immorality among the Corinthian

² Van Houwelingen, “Koninkrijk,” 87.

³ See René A. Lopez, “Does the Vice List in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 Describe Believers or Unbelievers?” *BibSac* 164 (2007): 59–73, on pp. 59–60. Much scholarly attention has been given to the precise reference of the terms *μαλακός* and *ἀρσενοκοίτης*. See e.g. Linda L. Belleville, “The Challenges of Translating *ἀρσενοκοίται* and *μαλακοί* in 1 Corinthians 6:9: A Reassessment in Light of Koine Greek and First-Century Cultural Mores,” *The Bible Translator* 62 (2011): 22–29, and more recently, Simon Hedlund, “Who Are the *ἀρσενοκοίται*, and Why Does Paul Condemn Them (1 Cor 6:9)?” *SEÁ* 82 (2017): 116–53.

⁴ Van Houwelingen, “Koninkrijk,” 88; For a connection between the concepts of kingdom and following Christ see Rob van Houwelingen, “Het koninkrijk van God en de navolging van Christus,” in *Theologie van het Nieuwe Testament in twintig thema’s*, ed. Armin D. Baum and Rob van Houwelingen (Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum, 2019), 309–25.

Christians. Then, in 6:1–11, he addresses the practice of litigation among the Corinthians, continuing in 6:12–20 to discuss issues of immorality. Chapter 7 deals with (abstinence from) sexual relationships and marriage. There is debate about the precise substantive connection of 6:1–11 to the immediate literary context. I will consider this question below when I examine the specific problem Paul addresses. First, however, I want to provide an overview of the honour discourse in the pericope.

Honour discourse has an evaluative character: It evaluates a state of affairs, rather than purely describing it.⁵ As a common discourse arising out of central cultural values, it is a socio-historical given and reflects the dynamics of living within an honour culture.⁶ In order to study honour discourse, it is not enough merely to highlight certain terminology belonging to the semantic domain of status. Because numerous cultures coexisted in the Greco-Roman world and competed for the loyalty of their members, honour discourse consists of “strategies developed by groups to insulate their own members from the opinion of outsiders and maintain their commitment to the group’s definition of honorable behaviour.”⁷ Through studying such strategies, David A. deSilva has developed a heuristic tool to discover honour discourse in New Testament texts, which I have used for my mapping of the honour discourse in 1 Corinthians 6:1–11.⁸

The following terminology belonging to the domain of “honour” can be listed:⁹

⁵ David A. deSilva, *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: SBL, 2008), 12. He refers to an unpublished paper by Jerome Neyrey, who claims that attention to the dimension of honour and shame in New Testament texts allows the interpreter to “see as the natives see, (...) value what they value; (...) understand why they act the way they do” (italics mine).

⁶ See, recently, Zeba A. Crook, *The Ancient Mediterranean Social World: A Sourcebook* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020) Kindle Edition, 134–74.

⁷ David A. deSilva, *The Hope of Glory. Honor Discourse and New Testament Interpretation* (Eugene Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 1.

⁸ DeSilva pays attention to language that establishes or reinforces the constituency of the alternate court of reputation (the boundaries of the group) and also to language that establishes or affirms the honour of the group or its members before the alternate court of reputation. Due to space limitations, it is not possible to describe the heuristic tool itself. See, however, deSilva, *The Hope of Glory*, 26–28.

⁹ For terminology and imagery related to honour, see the relevant domains in J.P. Louw and E.A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989); see also John H. Elliott, *Conflict, Community, and Honor: 1 Peter in Social-Scientific Perspective*, Cascade Companions (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 80–86; deSilva, *Despising Shame*, 27–35.

- κρίνω (“judge”) in 6:1, 2 (2×), 3, 5.
- διακρίνω (“distinguish, discern”) in 6:5
- κριτήριο (“law-court, lawsuit”) in 6:2, 4.
- κρίμα (“judgement, verdict, lawsuit”) in 6:7
- ἅγιος (“set apart, holy, sacred”) in 6:1, 2
- ἀγιάζω (“make holy, sanctify”) in 6:11
- σοφός (“wise”) in 6:5
- κληρονομέω (“inherit, obtain”) (βασιλείαν Θεοῦ - the kingdom of God) in 6:9, 10
- ἀπολούω (“wash off, wash away”) in 6:11
- δικαιόω (“make righteous”) in 6:11
- ὄνομα (“name, character, reputation”) in 6:11
- κύριος (“lord, Lord, master, sir”) in 6:11
- θεός (“god, God”) in 6:9, 10, 11.

The following terminology belonging to the domain of “shame” can be listed:

- ἄδικος (“unjust, unrighteous”) in 6:1, 9
- ἀδικέω (“act unjustly towards”) in 6:7, 8
- ἀνάξιος (“unworthy, inadequate”) in 6:2
- ἐξουθενέω (“despise”) in 6:4
- ἐντροπή (“shame”) in 6:5
- ἄπιστος (“unbelieving, unbeliever”) in 6:6
- ἥττημα (“defeat, failure”) in 6:7
- ἀποστερέω (“deprive one of something, rob”) in 6:7, 8
- vice list in vv. 9–10: πόρνος (“fornicator”), εἰδωλολάτρης (“worshipper of image”), μοιχός (“adulterer”), μαλακός (“soft, effeminate”)¹⁰, ἀρσενοκοίτης (“male engaging in same-gender sexual activity”)¹¹, κλέπτης (“thief”), πλεονέκτης (“covetous person”), μέθυσος (“drunkard”), λοιδορός (“a railer, reviler, abuser”), ἄρπαξ (“a robber, an extortioner”)

Given the subject of this pericope, it is not surprising that κρίνω and its cognates are well represented. That aside, 1 Corinthians 6:1–11 clearly contains a good deal of terminology related to honour and shame.

Paul distinguishes two groups: the ἅγιοι (“the saints”) and the ἄδικοι (“the unrighteous”). The designation ἅγιοι (“saints”) appears throughout

¹⁰ This translation is debated, however, see above, note 3.

¹¹ This translation is debated, however, see above, note 3.

the New Testament, often as a way for Christian believers to self-identify as members of the in-group.¹² The term ἄδικοι (“the unrighteous”), by contrast, refers to the out-group of “unbelievers” (κρίνεσθαι ἐπὶ τῶν ἀδίκων is paralleled in v. 6 with κρίνεται ἐπὶ ἀπίστων).¹³

Between these two groups runs a clear line dividing honour and shame.

vv. 1.2: ἅγιοι	vv. 1.9: ἄδικοι (v. 6 ἀπίστοι)
v. 2 οἱ ἅγιοι τὸν κόσμον κρινούσιν	v. 9a ἄδικοι θεοῦ βασιλείαν οὐ κληρονομήσουσιν
v. 3 ἀγγέλους κρινοῦμεν	v.9b–10 οὔτε πόρνοι οὔτε εἰδωλολάτραι οὔτε μοιχοὶ οὔτε μαλακοὶ οὔτε ἄρσενοκοῖται 10 οὔτε κλέπται οὔτε πλεονέκται, οὐ μέθυσοι, οὐ λοίδοροι, οὐχ ἄρπαγες βασιλείαν θεοῦ κληρονομήσουσιν

There appears to be a great difference in status between the two groups, particularly given the final destinations Paul assigns to them. Future indicatives form an *inclusio* around Paul’s argument to the Corinthians. In verse 2, the honourable status of the ἅγιοι is shown by the fact that they will judge the world.¹⁴ The idea of final judgment is then repeated in the first-person plural, this time with angels as the object of judgment. In contrast, verses 9–10 outline the future fate of the ἄδικοι: they will *not* inherit the kingdom of God.¹⁵ The terminology of inheritance involves very elevated language and can be found in connection with the Christians in Romans 8:17. In 1 Corinthians 6, however, Paul marks the shame of the unrighteous by “unfolding” this group by means of a long vice list and stressing, twice, that they shall *not* inherit the Kingdom.

¹² Paul Trebilco, *Self-designations and Group Identity in the New Testament* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 122–63.

¹³ Thiselton spells it out, referring to BDAG, 18: “one who does contrary to what is right” (Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 425). For the alternative interpretation of Bruce Winter see below.

¹⁴ The idea that “the saints” will judge the world is probably an echo of Dan 7:22. See Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 425, citing Daniel 7:22 LXX: “judgement was given to the saints of the Most High.” Thiselton also refers to other Jewish texts where the theme features (Wis 3:7, 8; 1Qp-Hab. 5:4) and to Christian apocalyptic: Revelation 2:26; 20:4; Matthew 19:29 // Luke 22:30.

¹⁵ In the New Testament, God’s promise to Abraham that he would inherit the land is interpreted in an eschatological way (e.g., Matt 25:34; 1 Cor 15:50; Gal 5:21; Jas 2:5).

Between the two groups are the Corinthians, brothers and sisters (ἀδελφός)¹⁶ to each other and addressed by Paul as ὑμεῖς (“you”). With regard to them, the line dividing honour from shame is not at all clear.

ὕμεῖς honor // ἄγιοι	ὕμεῖς shame // ἄδικοι
v.2 ἐν ὑμῖν κρίνεται ὁ κόσμος	v.2 ἀνάξιοι ἐστε;
	v.4 τοὺς ἐξουθενημένους ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ τούτους καθίζετε;
	v.5 πρὸς ἐντροπὴν ὑμῖν λέγω
	v.5 οὐκ ἔνι ἐν ὑμῖν οὐδεὶς σοφός ὃς δυνήσεται διακρίναι ἀνὰ μέσον τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ;
	v.7a ὅλως ἥττημα ὑμῖν ἐστὶν ὅτι κρίματα ἔχετε μεθ’ ἑαυτῶν
	vv.7b-8 διὰ τί οὐχὶ μᾶλλον ἀδικεῖσθε; διὰ τί οὐχὶ μᾶλλον ἀποστερεῖσθε; 8 ἀλλ’ ὑμεῖς ἀδικεῖτε καὶ ἀποστερεῖτε,
v.11 ἀλλ’ ἀπελούσασθε, ἀλλ’ ἡγιάσθητε, ἀλλ’ ἐδικαιώθητε ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἐν τῷ πνεύματι τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν	v.11 καὶ ταῦτά (refers to vice list) τινες ἦτε·

On the one hand, Paul, at the very beginning of his argument, includes the Corinthians in the group of saints (v. 2: “and if the world is judged by you”). In verse 11 he explicitly states that they are sanctified, using the verb ἡγιάσθητε in the middle of a string of verbs that express the honourable status the Corinthians now have: “you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified.” On the other hand, a lot of shame terminology is used in connection to the Corinthians. Sometimes it is

¹⁶ Besides the notion of inheritance, the only family imagery in this pericope is Paul’s use of the term ἀδελφός in the verses 5, 6 (2x), and 8.

wrapped in the irony of a question (e.g., in v. 2: ἀνάξιοι ἐστε; or in v. 5: οὐκ ἔνι ἐν ὑμῖν οὐδεὶς σοφός).¹⁷ However, Paul also uses low-status words, such as when he calls the actions of the Corinthians “wronging” and “defrauding” (v. 8: ἀλλ’ ὑμεῖς ἀδικεῖτε καὶ ἀποστερεῖτε). Thus, the Corinthians seem to oscillate between honour and shame. Their shameful behaviour does not match their honourable status in Christ, and they consequently seem to toggle between two “identities.” In Christ they belong to the group of ἄγιοι; the way they handle conflicts in the community places them among the ἄδικοι.

Paul’s honour discourse is aimed at maintaining the Corinthians’ commitment to the in-group’s definition of honourable behaviour. Paul uses strong contrasts to that end.

First, there is the contrast in status, both future and present. As indicated above, Paul contrasts the *future* status of the ἄγιοι and the ἄδικοι. He also contrasts the *present* status of the Corinthians (expressed by the three aorists: ἀπελούσασθε, ἡγιάσθητε, ἐδικαιώθητε) with the status of the ἄδικοι, which is characterised by vices. With regard to these vices, the past tense of εἰμί and the sharp contrast (three times ἀλλά!) in verse 11 clearly signal the desired stance of the Corinthians: καὶ ταῦτά τινες ἦτε· ἀλλ’ ἀπελούσασθε, ἀλλ’ ἡγιάσθητε, ἀλλ’ δικαιώθητε. Paul not only details their honour, but also refers to “the basis for this honor as defined by the group’s world-construction.”¹⁸ They are washed, sanctified, and justified “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”

Second, there is a meaningful contrast in verses 7b–8. Paul contrasts the middle (v. 7) and the active (v. 8) voices of the verbs ἀδικέω (“act unjustly towards”) and ἀποστερέω (“deprive one of something, rob”).¹⁹ Relationships among Christians must be characterised by the willingness to renounce one’s own rights for the benefit of a brother or sister (ἀδικεῖσθε and ἀποστερεῖσθε). Active wronging or the defrauding of a brother or sister (ἀδικεῖτε and ἀποστερεῖτε) makes one an ἄδικος.

¹⁷ The translation “unfit” (according to Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 427) misses the honour aspect of the term ἄξιος.

¹⁸ That is how deSilva (*Hope*, 27) formulates this strategy.

¹⁹ I agree with Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 437 on his interpretation of ἀδικεῖσθε and ἀποστερεῖσθε as “passiva tolerativa,” a “permissive” use of the middle voice: “let yourselves be deprived of your rights, let yourselves be defrauded.” (See also David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 209, note 23). This interpretation matches Paul’s cruciform spirituality (see below) best. See the translation of the NKJV: “Why do you not rather *accept* wrong? Why do you not rather *let yourselves be cheated*?” (italics mine).

And, as we all know, the ἄδικοι, Paul continues, will not inherit the Kingdom of God. With the transition from the middle to the active voice, Paul makes clear the fate awaiting the Corinthians if they continue to act as they do.

Interestingly, Paul is even explicit about the fact that this argument is meant to shame the Corinthians: “I say this to your shame” (v. 5a; compare 15:34). As Te-Li Lau has recently argued, Paul uses the positive formative aspect of shame in his rhetoric.²⁰ Lau points out the many rhetorical statements in 1 Corinthians 6:1–11:

“Paul rebukes and shames the Corinthians with a series of rhetorical statements that show his horror and frustration: ‘Do you dare take it to court?’ (6:1); ‘Do you not know?’ (6:2, 3, 9); ‘Are you not competent?’ (6:2); ‘Can it be that there is no wise man among you?’ (6:5); ‘And this before unbelievers?’ (6:6); ‘Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?’ (6:7).”²¹

In short, there is no lack of honour terminology in this pericope. Paul outlines two groups: the ἄγιοι and the ἄδικοι. Between these two groups runs a clear line dividing honour from shame. Toggling between the two groups are the Corinthians, addressed by Paul as ὁμοῖς. The line dividing honour from shame is not at all clear with regard to them, because their shameful behaviour does not match their honourable status in Christ. Paul’s honour discourse is aimed at maintaining the Corinthians’ commitment to the in-group’s definition of honourable behaviour, and he uses strong contrasts to that end. He also rebukes and shames the Corinthians with a series of rhetorical statements, thus applying the positive formative aspect of shame.

At the textual level, the vice list in verses 9–10 clearly has a function in Paul’s honour discourse: it marks the shameful status of the unrighteous. In the next section, I will focus on the specific situation that Paul

²⁰ Te-Li Lau, *Defending Shame: Its Formative Power in Paul’s Letters*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020). Lau works with the categories of retrospective shame (which relates to events in the past and present that evoke shame) and prospective shame (which relates to events in the future that might cause shame). He shows how both forms of shame are incorporated into Paul’s rhetoric aimed at moral transformation. See, on the positive function of Paul’s shaming the Corinthians, also Dietmar Neufeld, “Acts of Admonition and Rebuke: A Speech-Act Approach to 1 Corinthians 6:1–11,” *BibInt* 8 (2000): 375–99. See also Niilo Lahti who argues that shaming the Corinthians is Paul’s first aim in 4:18–6:20. Niilo Lahti, “The Maneuvering Paul. A Pragmatic-Dialectical Analysis of Paul’s Argumentation in First Corinthians 4:18–7:40,” (PhD diss., University of Eastern Finland, 2017), 247.

²¹ Lau, *Shame*, 116.

addresses in this pericope. In doing so, I hope to relate the honour discourse in a meaningful way to the socio-historical context in which it is embedded.

The Specific Situation Paul is Addressing

In 1 Corinthians 6:1–11, Paul is responding to a specific form of litigation practiced among the Corinthians.²² Most scholars have assumed that the Corinthian Christians engaged in civil lawsuits before local tribunals.²³ At the time, there was a difference between the criminal courts of the Roman government and the courts of the local civil magistrate, the latter of which settled minor day-to-day disputes. That would accord with the “trivial cases” referred to by Paul in verse 2 and the “matters pertaining to this life” in verse 3. It is often thought that the lawsuits were about financial matters, because of the “defrauding” mentioned in verses 7b–8.²⁴

Rosner has shown how the distinction between civil and criminal law could also be found in ancient Israel. According to him, this fact helps to answer the question of the substantive connection between 1 Corinthians 6:1–11 and its immediate literary context. “Many commentators,” he notes, “struggle to discover a contextual link between 5:1–13 and 6:1–11, often regarding 6:1–11 as an aside interrupting Paul’s discussion of *πορνεία* in 5:1–13 and 6:12–20. 1 Corinthians 5:1–13 and 6:1–11 may well be related in that they both concern law: in one case criminal law; in the other civil law.”²⁵

²² See 6:2, 4 (κριτήριον, “law-court, lawsuit”) and 6:7 (κρίμα, “lawsuit”).

²³ E.g., Bruce W. Winter, “Civil Litigation in Secular Corinth and the Church: The Forensic Background to 1 Corinthians 6.1–8,” *NTS* 37 (1991): 559–72, on p. 561; Brian S. Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, and Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5–7*, AGJU 22 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 94–95.

²⁴ E.g., Reginald H. Fuller, “First Corinthians 6:1–11: An Exegetical Paper,” *ExAud* 2 (1986): 96–104, on p. 99; Joop Smit, “Paulus: wie is hij en waar staat hij voor? 1 Kor. 5,1–13 en 6:1–11 als testcase,” *TvT* 44 (2004): 344–60. Based on Paul’s reference to inheritance in vv. 9–10, Michael Peppard suggests that the matter is about fraternal lawsuits (“*controversiae*”), which were often inheritance disputes. Michael Peppard, “Brother against Brother: *Controversiae* about Inheritance Disputes and 1 Corinthians 6:1–11,” *JBL* 133 (2014): 179–92. See, for the many ways to settle disputes in Paul’s context, J. Duncan M. Derrett, “Judgement and 1 Corinthians 6,” in *NTS* 37 (1991): 22–36, on pp. 24–26.

²⁵ Rosner, *1 Corinthians 5–7*, 108. There are other ways to solve this problem. Will Deming, for example, suggests that there was a legal struggle among the Corinthians over the sexual misconduct in 5:1 (“The Unity of 1 Corinthians 5–6,” *JBL* 115 [1996]: 289–312).

There are different views on how, precisely, the mechanism of honour and shame was involved in litigation. More particularly, there is no clear sense of the relationship between lawsuits, different social strata and the involved persons' honour-rating. According to Bruce Malina, in the first-century world "normal legal procedures were used to *dishonor* someone or some group, perceived to be of higher, more powerful status, and recourse to such procedures was an admission of inequality."²⁶ Between equals, the honour had to be restored by the challenged person himself. It was regarded as "highly dishonorable and against the rules of honor to go to court and seek legal justice from one's equal."²⁷ To do so would be a public admission of inequality, an inability to deal with one's peers. As Alan Mitchell observes, although people would avoid seeking legal justice from one's equal because of the implied dishonour, it would be *honourable* "to reclaim one's good name by taking someone of a lower status to court. In fact, at times, it may have been necessary."²⁸ Bruce Winter seems to agree with Mitchell, though he departs from Malina by insisting that "generally, lawsuits were conducted between social equals who were from the powerful (οἱ δυνατοί) of the city, or by a plaintiff of superior social status and power against an inferior."²⁹ Not all people had the right to prosecute. Powerful, wealthy people of higher social strata were protected from being taken to court by discriminating rules or practices, so as to avoid the public tarnishing of their good names.³⁰ Dietmar Neufeld even goes so far as to state that "lawsuits were, in effect, social competitions for incremental increases in prestige through the game of challenge and riposte."³¹

Why was Paul concerned with the practice of litigation among the Corinthians, and why was he shaming and rebuking so sharply? Even though it remains unclear how the mechanism of honour and shame was involved in the practice of litigation itself, most scholars agree that Paul

²⁶ Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 45.

²⁷ Malina, *New Testament World*, 44.

²⁸ Alan Mitchell, "Rich and Poor in the Courts of Corinth: Litigiousness and Status in 1 Corinthians 6:1–11," *NTS* 39 (1993): 562–86, on p. 574.

²⁹ Winter, "Civil Litigation," 561.

³⁰ Winter, "Civil Litigation," 561; Ben Witherington III, *Conflict & Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 163; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 200.

³¹ Neufeld, "Acts of Admonition and Rebuke," 399. The increase of prestige might be related to the opportunity to display oratory talents (p. 387; see also Winter, "Civil Litigation," 567).

was concerned about the Corinthian Christians' honourable reputation before outsiders.³² This desire to make a good impression is motivated, firstly, by the fact that a negative image of Christians and the resulting slander would dishonour the name of God Himself and, secondly, by the fact that a positive image of Christians could have a proselytising effect on the outsiders.³³

Another major concern of Paul is more related to the in-group alone. The settling of disputes before a "secular" court worsened the divisions that already existed among the Corinthian Christians. Mitchell argues that upper-status Christians in Corinth were suing lower-status Christians before pagan magistrates, thereby exploiting their relations with outsiders to their own advantage.³⁴ Thiselton also points to the problem that "the local civil magistrate's courts allowed too much room for patronage and vested interest in the stance of local judges or the appointment of juries to reflect anything like even a near degree of integrity in comparison with major criminal courts."³⁵ Winter even interprets the ἄδικοι in 6:1 as a reference to the character of judges or juries in the civil courts (and therefore not identical to the ἀπίστοι in 6:6). These judges were unjust in the way they reached their decisions, and Paul's concern for Christians engaging in this kind of practice is understandable.³⁶ For Paul, Christians suing other Christians (v. 6: ἀδελφὸς μετὰ ἀδελφοῦ κρίνεται) before pagan magistrates cannot lead to honour. On the contrary, "the fact that they do so before those least esteemed by the Church is a counter-sign to their true status and is thus shameful."³⁷

³² E.g. Fuller, "First Corinthians 6:1–11," 99; Rosner, *1 Corinthians 5–7*, 109–11; Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 429.

³³ Rosner, *1 Corinthians 5–7*, 109 referring to W.C. van Unnik; see also Kobus Kok, ed., *Sensitivity towards Outsiders*, WUNT 2/364 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); Myriam Klinker-De Klerck, "Dissertation and Monograph Summary," *Journal for the Study of Paul and his Letters* 3 (2013): 263–67.

³⁴ Mitchell, "Rich and Poor," 574. See also John K. Chow, *Patronage and Power: A Study of Social Networks in Corinth*, JSNTSup 75 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 123–30.

³⁵ Thiselton, *First Corinthians*, 419.

³⁶ Winter, "Civil Litigation," 562–64.

³⁷ Mitchell, "Rich and Poor," 574. In this interpretation, "those least esteemed by the Church" are thought of as outsiders. Brent Kinman offers another interpretation in "'Appoint the Despised as Judges!'" (1 Corinthians 6:4)," *TynBul* 48 (1997): 345–54. He argues that Paul refers to the least esteemed brothers and sisters in the community. The Corinthians are to lay their cases before those humble brothers and sisters. By consequence, Kinman interprets καθίζετε not as an indicative, but as an imperative; See also Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 207.

For all these reasons, Paul wants the Corinthians to settle any disputes internally.³⁸

In short, Paul's honour discourse is aimed at maintaining the Corinthians' commitment to the in-group's definition of honourable behaviour. In 1 Corinthians 6:1–11 more specifically, Paul wants to prevent the ἄγιοι from engaging in civil litigation before local courts of the ἄδικοι. The apostle's shaming rebuke characterises this practice as dishonourable in two respects. Firstly, the public quarrelling of Christians is not only a dishonour to God's holy name, it also impedes the Christian mission. Secondly, the settling of disputes before a "secular" court only worsened the divisions that already existed among the Corinthian Christians by harming lower-status Christians. Clearly this was at odds with Paul's definition of honourable Christian behaviour. Indeed, from a Christian perspective, *accepting to be harmed* is preferable.

So why were there disputes in the first place? Ultimately, the goal of Paul's honour discourse is to get the community of saints to behave in a way that reflects its true identity and its elevated status in Christ, which, paradoxically, means pursuing honour in a cruciform way of life. That is how the socio-historical level connects with the theological level, to which I will turn my attention now.

How to Inherit the Kingdom of God? The Honour of Kenotic Suffering

Paul shares the honour *discourse* of his time; however, the *content* of what constitutes honour—in other words, the specific ethos of the Christian group—differs. Important to our understanding of Paul's reasoning in such matters is the realisation that the apostle is driven by a "divine reversal"³⁹ of claims to worth. Hence his question in verse 7: "Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated?" (NKJV). In the Greco-Roman agonistic context, where the

³⁸ It is usually assumed that this solution is based on the model of contemporary Jewish judicial practices (e.g., Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 200–201, who also mentions the jurisdiction and courts of Greek confraternities). Rosner, however, shows that it also directly connects with a passage from Scripture where Moses himself, upon the advice of Jethro, his father-in-law, appointed competent laymen as judges (Exod 18:13–26 and Deut 1:9–17), which was different from the appointment of elders as the model for Jewish jurisdiction in Paul's context (Rosner, *1 Corinthians 5–7*, 95–107).

³⁹ For this term, see Elliott, *Conflict*, 74–75, referring to a study of James C. Scott (*Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, 1990) on strategies used by minority groups to react to a challenge by dominating groups.

pursuit of honour through continuous processes of challenge and riposte was vital,⁴⁰ this preference for suffering and being defrauded was “logic upside down.” Indeed, Paul goes on to rebuke the Corinthians: “But you yourselves wrong and defraud, and that even your own brethren” (v. 8). The litigating ἄγιοι have more in common with the ἄδικοι. Paul’s distinction in verses 7–8 between ἀδικεῖσθε/ἀποστερεῖσθε and ἀδικεῖτε/ἀποστερεῖτε is not merely a play on words. In fact, the middle voice is a compact way of expressing the cruciform spirituality which underpins Paul’s ethical reasoning. The sharp contrast between the middle and the active voice is also a compact way of articulating the core of the problem in the Corinthian church. I will elaborate on both of these claims below.

Cruciform Spirituality: the Foundation of Paul’s Ethical Reasoning

In his book *Cruciformity*, Michael Gorman elaborates on Paul’s spirituality of the cross.⁴¹ He defines “cruciformity” as “conformity to the crucified Christ.”⁴² Cruciformity is a “narrative” spirituality: central to it is the narrative of Jesus Christ as described in Philippians 2:6–11. Here, Jesus Christ is described as emptying himself of his Godly status, all the way to the point of his shameful death on the cross. Paradoxically, however, that is precisely the way to incarnate God’s love and why, as a consequence, he is exalted and glorified by God. As an apostle following Jesus and proclaiming the gospel, Paul treads the same kenotic path. The narrative of Christ becomes *his* narrative. The same holds for all Christians. In doing so, Christians mirror the self-emptying love of Jesus Christ and of God himself. As such, all Christians share in the mission of God. It is precisely this kenotic movement to which Paul refers when he asks the Corinthians, “Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated?” (NKJV).

Paul’s kenotic spirituality is not just the sum total of kenotic deeds. As a spirituality, it permeates all of Christian life. In fact, it enacts a fundamental change of identity. In his recent book on self-denial, Stuart Rochester shows how, for Paul, self-denial is embedded in his new identity in Christ and how this affects the entirety of his apostleship: the honour to which he aspires, what he boasts about, the suffering he is prepared to

⁴⁰ Malina, *New Testament World*, 34–38.

⁴¹ Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

⁴² Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 4.

undergo, *et cetera*.⁴³ The Corinthians also locate their identity in Christ, which means that they too belong to the ἄγιοι. And cruciformity is a core-attitude in the ethos of the ἄγιοι, especially compared to the ethos of the ἄδικοι. As a spirituality, cruciformity is a transformative process, as Eve-Marie Becker also stresses in her recent book on Paul's view on humility.⁴⁴ Last but not least, cruciformity, as a spirituality, involves the whole community. Ecclesiological unity is important in Paul's ethical teaching. As was made clear above, Paul's rejection of the Corinthians' litigation in the courts of local civil magistrates was motivated by the fraternal unity of the congregation.⁴⁵ Michael Gorman also stresses the outward-oriented dimension of cruciformity: the sharing of the Christian community in the mission of God through a communally embodied cruciform spirituality.

The Core Problem in the Corinthian Community

Paul's sharp contrast between the middle and the active voice of ἀδικέω and ἀποστερέω in verses 7–8 is a compact way of articulating the core problem among the Christians at Corinth: They have a problem with embodying cruciformity. They are focused on seeking honour the way they used to in their "former" lives. The fact that they settle their grievances amongst each other by going to court before the "unrighteous" is symptomatic of their pursuit of honour as defined by the out-group. In fact, most problems that Paul touches upon in his letter reveal the same mechanism. The infighting described in the first chapters, their discussion about the gifts of the Spirit—worldly honour seems to motivate their behaviour as opposed to a cruciform attitude that seeks to elevate fellow Christians and the community as a whole. This applies especially to the "rights" discussed in the chapters 8–10, the eating of sacrificial meat and the recognition of Paul's authority as an apostle.⁴⁶

Paul shows the Corinthians that in their "new" lives, Jesus Christ and their belonging to him provide the basis of their honour. This fact turns

⁴³ Stuart Rochester, *Self-Denial: A New Testament View* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019) Kindle Edition.

⁴⁴ Eve-Marie Becker, *Der Begriff der Demut bei Paulus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

⁴⁵ See also Michael Wolter, "'Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's' (1 Corinthians 10,24): Pauline ethics according to 1 Corinthians," in *Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the New Testament*, ed. J.G. van der Watt, BZNW 141 (Berlin; New York: de Gruyter, 2006), 199–217, esp. on pp. 209 and 212.

⁴⁶ Dietmar Neufeld ("Acts of Admonition and Rebuke," 375–99) relates his interpretation of the pericope to the emerging problems with Paul's own leadership as an apostle.

their whole sense of worth upside down. Suffering because of belonging to Christ becomes an honourable reality; cruciformity is “the new honour.”⁴⁷ Already in the first chapter of the letter, Paul states matters as they are: “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1:18). This contrast between shameful perishing and glorious salvation approaches the contrast between the future of the ἄγιοι and the ἄδικοι described in 6:1–11. For Rosner, this prospect of a glorious future is one reason to recognise the biblical motif of righteous suffering in 6:7–8.⁴⁸ At other moments, e.g., 2 Corinthians 4:17, Paul also connects the thought of suffering with the promise of future glory; in Romans 8:17, he even uses the terminology of “inheritance”.

“It is this notion that provides a bridge between 1 Corinthians 6:7–8 and the following three verses. Paul states in 6:9 that ‘the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God.’ The natural question to ask is, who will inherit the kingdom? The answer is, those who suffer righteously, by refusing to fight disputes with their brothers (6:7–8).”⁴⁹

In short, Paul shares the honour *discourse* of his time. However, the *content* of what specifically constitutes honour for a Christian differs radically from what the Corinthians were used to in their former lives. The core problem among the Christians of Corinth was their difficulty embodying a cruciform spirituality. In striving for honour, they paradoxically risked losing it. Hence Paul’s sharp rebuke and warning: the ἄδικοι will not inherit the kingdom of God, do not be deceived; “neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God” (RSV).

⁴⁷ For further argumentation on this “divine reversal,” see Myriam Klinker-De Klerck, “Lijden omwille van Christus” in *Theologie van het Nieuwe Testament in twintig thema’s*, ed. Armin D. Baum and Rob van Houwelingen (Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum, 2019), 365–80.

⁴⁸ Rosner, *1 Corinthians 5–7*, 116–18. He argues this in contrast to scholars who relate Paul’s words in 6:7–8 directly to Jesus’ non-retaliatory ethics in Matt 5:39–42. According to Rosner, however, they find their natural place in the theme of suffering in the letter to the Corinthians as a whole. For the biblical theme of righteous suffering, see Karl Theodor Kleinknecht, *Der leidende Gerechtfertigte: Die alttestamentlich-jüdische Tradition von ‘leidenden Gerechten’ und ihre Rezeption bei Paulus*, WUNT 2/13 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1984).

⁴⁹ Rosner, *1 Corinthians 5–7*, 118. See also Brian S. Rosner, “The Origin and Meaning of 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 in Context,” *BZ* 40 (1996): 250–53.

Conclusion

I agree with Rob van Houwelingen about the vice list in 6:9–10. Rather than striving for a perfect church, Paul tries to prevent the Corinthians from falling back into their old ways. The apostle wants to build a church that continually mirrors God’s holiness. He wants the Corinthian Christians to live a life oriented towards God’s kingdom, to live more and more as a cruciform community, true to its identity in Christ, its crucified and risen Lord.

To shift the Corinthians’ mentality in that direction, Paul shames them through rebukes and uses honour discourse to show them how to achieve true honour. In this context, the vice list and the stern warning that “whoever does wrong will have no part in the kingdom of God” have a clear function. They mark the shameful status of the unrighteous (ἄδικοι) in contrast to the honourable status of the Corinthian Christians, referred to as “saints” (ἄγιοι). Paul draws a clear line between the respective honour and shame of both groups in order to shame the Corinthians (ὕμεῖς) for oscillating between them. When Christians engage in civil lawsuits before local tribunals, it does not suit their true identity and elevated status in Christ. Their public quarrelling dishonours God’s holy name and impedes the Christian mission. The settling of disputes before a “secular” court also worsens the divisions that already exist among them by harming lower-status Christians. Clearly this is at odds with Paul’s definition of honourable Christian behaviour. Paul is clear on this front: *accepting to be harmed* is preferable, so why have disputes in the first place?

Instead of pursuing honour according to the definition of society, Paul urges the Corinthians to follow a kenotic path, to honour God and Christ by living faithfully in a cruciform way. In doing so, Christians can achieve honour, perhaps not by society’s standards, but certainly before God. Cruciformity is the new honour.

Our contemporary, Western understanding of honour and shame differs from that of Paul’s time. That said, the apostle’s honour discourse in 1 Corinthians 6:1–11, with its razor-sharp distinction between the “unrighteous” and the “saints,” strongly appeals to our lives as Christians. It urges us to live a life befitting of our Christian identity. Paul’s emphasis on cruciformity is a powerful, kenotic corrective to a culture where the idolatry of the Self determines what does and does not have value. In our context, too, pitting ourselves against one another has become the order of the day. *A fortiori* Western people, living in a liberal

context, find it difficult to renounce their own rights. Paul, for his part, has found his identity in Christ. His cruciform attitude is a prerequisite for truly caring for others and building a sustainable community in Christ. In all this for Paul, the *adagium* of *sola gratia* remains fully in force, more specifically in his confession of the *solī Deo gloria*.

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