

Rio Rancho Presbyterian

Rev. Frank Yates

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SEE YOU IN COURT

I Corinthians 6: 1-8

In 1977 the Supreme Court in *Bates v. State Bar of Arizona* allowed attorneys to advertise their services. Have they ever since! Over the years I have noticed a proliferation of attorney ads both on television and billboards. It seems to me that these ads have two purposes. The first is to build name recognition and the other is to make big promises.

You know the importance of a brand name or a logo. For instance: Hurt, call Bert. Ring the Bell. The Tank. The Law Giant. I am New Mexico. As local as red or green for 40 years. Call a face who works your case. Your fight is our fight. Motorcycle accident? Call the Law Tiger. The Name you know. There's them, then there's us. The power to win. Keller wins. Make it Right-Wrongful Deaths NM. We win big. Truck wrecks are our business. If you're hurt, call us first. Get justice, start healing. And brand new this week: The Red Headed Legal Lady. Do you recognize any of these firms?

And the second purpose of these attorney ads is to promise a big payday. For instance: Millions recovered. Billions recovered. \$59 million for truck wreck, death. \$20 million for leg amputation. Hit by a truck, hit back. Dail 4, get more. Get big results. One call, that's all. Results matter. In a crash, need cash? Hit by a drunk driver, think big. You don't pay till we win. We mean business. You get the picture here? I suppose justice now just means quick cash.

Now before you think I am lawyer bashing, you must know that two of my best friends are lawyers. Really. And I have known many honorable attorneys in my lifetime. Actually, I like lawyers. Now the ones who advertise are a tiny fraction of that honorable profession. In fact, John Calvin was first a lawyer before he became a theologian. So the law has always been held in high esteem in the Presbyterian tradition. OK, so have I covered all my bases here?

But the truth of the matter is that we are a litigious society. In its quest for cash, the legal profession can be corrupted like any other profession. Remember "Better Call Saul"? Recently two well-known Albuquerque attorneys pled guilty to conspiring with police officers to fix DWI cases. Some lawyers use their skills for all sorts of dishonest purposes. But remember, the bottom five percent of every

profession sadly does not live up to its oath of office. Like corrupt pastors! Same story.

Which brings us to I Corinthians 6. Paul has a problem on his hands. Some of these young Christians were suing each other in court, the Roman courts. Paul was aghast! We do not know what the disputes were about. But the fact that Christians would sue other Christians in a pagan court was just beyond the pale. Paul called it a “defeat for you.”

Paul’s first reaction is very counter-cultural, then and now. The apostle suggests that it’s preferable to be wronged and defrauded than go to court against a fellow believer. Say again, Paul? It appears that Paul is saying don’t press your case even if you have valid reasons. Airing one’s dirty laundry against a fellow believer in a pagan court would be far worse, truly shameful in Paul’s mind.

By the way, Jesus would seem to mirror Paul’s reluctance to go to court. Jesus suggests that if you are accused of a wrong, be sure to “come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him.” In other words, seek a settlement outside court. Or you may be thrown in jail until you “have paid the last penny” (Mt. 5:26). These are the words of a vulnerable minority before a Roman judge.

Paul's second reaction is very practical. Paul suggests that the Corinthian church should select someone in their midst discerning enough to judge the case. By the way, our denomination has a Book of Discipline that guides judicial cases within the Presbyterian Church. We settle what Paul calls "ordinary matters" in house. I wish our fellow Presbyterians would have heeded Paul's advice when they went to court to take their church property with them upon withdrawing from the denomination. Alas.

But the reason Paul gives for judging their own disputes is truly counter-cultural. And if you have never heard of this, don't be surprised. Paul says surely you can settle your own cases since Christians "will judge the world." Then he adds-astonishingly-that "we are to judge the angels." Oh my! Similarly, Jesus told the disciples that when he returns in glory that the Twelve Apostles will "sit on the twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Mt. 19:28).

What are Jesus and Paul talking about? Both seem to be pointing to an exalted role for followers when the Son of Man returns. I don't pretend to understand all this. And by the way, it is a very minor note in the New Testament. Why don't we simply say that both Paul and Jesus envision a role for Christians in the Last

Judgment that is quite mysterious. It's Paul's way of saying that because of your future exalted role, you can surely handle conflicts within the church. The rest is a mystery yet to be revealed.

Now what are the important takeaways from the words of Jesus and Paul? We should not turn their words into a kind of "New Law" for Christians. Rather, their words are a challenge for us to see the world differently than the lawyer billboards advertise-the world of financial rewards.

Now there are, of course, legitimate uses of our courts. This week I had lunch with a Christian paralegal who helps attorneys file suit on behalf of disabled children denied their rights. I applaud his work. And there are serious legal charges that secular courts must handle, like felonies of all kinds. We need a judiciary that is fair and just, one that is truly impartial.

But for Christians to take other Christians to court is in the mind of Paul simply intolerable. It presents a terrible witness to the world. For Paul, sometimes it is better to be wronged than to be right in court. For Jesus, try to settle with your accuser before you even go to court. Work it out, go to mediation. Can we hear these challenging words?

Imagine the kind of lawyer billboards that would feature Paul and Jesus. A picture of Paul with these words: “There’s them, then there’s us. No contest.” A picture of Jesus with these words: “Settle. Agree. Mediate. Before you lose it all.” Such advertising would probably not get the law firm of Jesus and Paul much business, would it?

So this is the astonishing counter-cultural vision of the Kingdom of God. Its operating instructions are radically different than the world’s. The Kingdom of God invites us “to be transformed by Christ” into New Creatures. People so very different from what the world typically presents.

That means we leave our nets behind and risk all for the Lord. We love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We turn the other cheek, go the extra mile. We lend without expecting anything in return. We give the coat off our back. We forgive seventy times seven. Sometimes we just let things go. And the two hardest challenges of all—love your neighbor as you love yourself. Do unto others as you would have done to you. A lifetime challenge indeed! That is why Jesus says, “Count the cost” before you follow him. This is truly “costly grace”.

Now all these admonitions make the Christian life seem impossibly difficult. In truth, Reinhold Niebuhr once called the Christian life “the impossible possibility.” Yes, it seems quite beyond us to become the kind of people Jesus wants us to be. But then we confess with gratitude and amazement, “With God all things are possible.” All things! Even the “impossible possibility” of being transformed by Christ into New Creatures. People the likes of which the world has seldom seen. So see you in court? Maybe not.