

*Question: We seem to have a lot of lawsuits in America today. While some of these may be necessary, many of them seem unnecessary. What would Jesus say about this matter?*

In our country, the legal right to sue originated to insure that individual rights are justly protected from abuse by those who would take unfair advantage of others. Unfortunately, many lawsuits we hear about today seem to be more about getting a large financial settlement than about justice. The right to sue was not designed to enrich us because of a loss we may have suffered.

On one occasion, Jesus was asked to serve as an arbitrator by a man who wanted Jesus to tell his bother that their inheritance should be divided. Jesus refused to get involved, saying: “Man who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” He then proceeded to give a warning against all kinds of greed, saying: “A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:13ff). In these situations, the example and words of Jesus are very appropriate. However, the Bible does have other things to say about lawsuits.

For example, the apostle Paul strongly admonished Christian believers not to take disputes with one another before unbelieving judges of the public law courts. Instead, they should find Christian believers among them who are wise enough to judge their disputes (1 Corinthians 6:1-8). Paul also thought that a believer going to law against another believer in front of unbelievers was shameful; and he said: “The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?” (1 Corinthians 6:7). Paul’s instructions applied to disputes between believers over matters like a property line or an inheritance. However, there are other principles that need to be considered when a person violates the law of the land.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus suggests other principles for dealing with any problem, legal or civil, among believers or between believers and unbeliever. He taught that people of the Kingdom of God should always seek to settle any dispute with an adversary outside of court first and avoid any possible legal consequences (Matthew 5:25-26). Later, in a series of hyperbolic statements Jesus said, “And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well” (Matthew 5:40). While we do not need to take

this statement in the most literal way since it is a kind of overstatement for the purpose of emphasis, his instructions at this point do provide an important principle. Jesus wants his followers to be more concerned about peace, patience, kindness, forgiveness and love than about their personal rights.

Should we conclude from the above that Christian believers should never go to court against someone? No, there may be times when we need to use the public legal system. After all, God ordained our civil government for the purpose of protecting that which is good and right (Romans 13:1-7). However, any legal action on the part of a Christian against another person should be determined case by case and only out of concern for the good of others, not for the enrichment of self. Titus 3:1-2 gives a good summary statement of the spirit that should prevail, "Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men." This statement well expresses the Spirit of Jesus for Christians in all situations they may confront in life, whether with fellow-believers or with unbelievers in the world. To act otherwise can bring shame upon the name of the Lord we claim to follow.

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