

What About ... Going to Court?

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Historically, disputes were settled by family patriarchs (Genesis 13:8-11; 14:12-16). Apparently, they would also gather at the city gates to settle inner family disputes (Deuteronomy 22:15, 24; Joshua 20:4; Ruth 4:1). In the 1500s B.C., the Mosaic Law established a court system in Israel for the purpose of applying and enforcing the Law of God (Deuteronomy 16:18; 17:8-12). These were not secular courts, they were part of a theocracy which governed the nation. So Israelites were encouraged to go to their courts and follow the decisions of its judges (and its appellate judges, the priests). God did not tell the Israelites to submit to Egyptian or Babylonian courts. For example, both Daniel and his friends refused to submit to official rulings in Babylon and Persia when they violated the commands of God (Daniel 3:17-18; 6:7-16).

The New Testament has a different attitude toward the courts. Unlike Israel, the church is not a territorial government. It is a global fellowship of brothers and sisters living for God in the midst of different secular (or false religious) governments.

The church functions more like Daniel and his friends in Babylon and Persia. The New Testament command is to submit to the courts (1 Peter 2:13-17; Romans 13:1-5), unless they tell you to disobey the Word of God (Acts 4:19). But avoid them, if at all possible, and do not go to them for decision-making.

Jesus said (at least) three things about the courts:

1. Some were corrupt, with *a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man* (Luke 18:1-5).
2. *If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also* (Matthew 5:40).
3. *For while you are going with your opponent to appear before the magistrate, on your way there make an effort to settle with him, so that he may not drag you before the judge* (Luke 12:58).

The main point Jesus made about courts was—stay out of them. Never choose to go to court. [Of course, Jesus' real point is you do not want to face God in judgment.] If someone forces you into court, the advice of Jesus is to settle outside of court, even if you are right, even if you are sure you will win, and no matter how good you believe your case is. If you are forced into court, your objective should not be to protect your material wealth (Matthew 6:19-21).

When arrested and taken to Caesarea, Paul made a truthful, reasonable defense (Acts 22:25-29; 23:6-9; 24:6-10; 25:6-11). His opponents had no case at all, *bringing many and serious charges against him which they could not prove* (Acts 25:7). Yet he was in prison for two years, then taken to Rome. After Paul was arrested, he never escaped the legal system. He was in prison the rest of his life, except for a short time of release before he was arrested again and killed (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

Concerning believers, Paul told the Corinthians, *Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?* (1 Corinthians 6:7). His point was that believers should decide their own matters.

So We Can Conclude

Going to court will focus your attention on putting a positive spin on your sin nature. It will drain your time, money, and energy, so you will lose (even if you win the case). Don't go to court to appeal a traffic conviction, to get your money back, or to get your share of an inheritance, or to get revenge, or justice, or to prove you are right, or any such thing. Corporations may have to go to court to get paid or settle cost disputes, but treat it as business, don't make it personal. You may be forced into court for various reasons. If you are, speak (or ask your lawyer to speak) in such a way as to tell the truth, make your case in a reasonable way, and expect to lose.

