



CHAPTER 1



The Litigation Trap

A man's wisdom gives him patience;
it is to his glory to overlook an offense.

—PROVERBS 19:11

Life Lessons—Jeff and Jenny

Jeff slowly ran his fingers through Jenny's soft blonde hair as he climbed back into bed after closing the bedroom windows.

"Just try to get some sleep, Jen. We've been through so much lately, and you worked so late tonight," he whispered gently. Though Jeff's words sounded reassuring, silently he was asking himself, *Could it be true?*

Jenny's tired voice quivered, "I can't sleep up here, Jeff." He could tell she was exhausted and close to tears. His heart sank as she slid out of bed. He knew what was coming next. "With the windows shut, I'll never fall asleep anyway—it's too stuffy," she grumbled, pulling on her cloth robe. "I'll have to sleep downstairs on the couch as usual."

2 THE BELIEVER'S GUIDE TO LEGAL ISSUES

And then, with an unmistakable edge in her voice, “I thought that big shot lawyer of yours was going to get this problem solved. Instead, it gets worse every night. A real husband would stand up for his family. Why don’t you go next door and tell those people off once and for all?” It was never like Jenny to be so harsh. As she stormed down the steps, everything became too clear to Jeff.

“My gosh,” he muttered, “what have I gotten us into?”

Even with the windows locked tight, Jeff could hear the steady beat of the drums and bass guitar rattling against the glass as he lay there alone in the dark bedroom. The houses were so close. It was only 10:30 and it was going to be another long and lonely night. *How has it come to this?* he lamented. Now it seemed like even his relationship with Jenny had fallen apart. *God, I hate those people!* he seethed.

As he drifted fitfully in and out of sleep, Jeff recounted events in his mind. Life had been good before those people moved in. At first, he and Jenny had intended to invite them over for a cookout some weekend, to get to know them and welcome them to the neighborhood. But with tight work schedules and running the kids around to day care and activities, it just never got on the calendar. That was all before the music started.

Well, at least we did one thing right, Jeff reflected emptily. *I’m glad we never invited those jerks onto our property.*

The first time the music came on next door, it wasn’t such a big deal. Jeff figured that maybe they were throwing a little party or something. Sleep came easily enough without the anger. But after the third night in a row Jenny, he, and the kids were all getting agitated. Jeff was the man of the house and he was going to have to do something. He thought about going next door and asking them to turn the music down, but he had no idea how they might react. It was late, and he especially didn’t like the looks of the neighbor’s teenage son. He feared things could get ugly. That’s when he thought of calling the police.

It seemed like the perfect solution. It was the safe thing to do and nobody would even have to know who called in the complaint. The officers showed up next door about twenty minutes later and things got quiet instantly. Soon everyone settled down and fell asleep.

But the next night, the music was back. So the police were called again. "If that's what it takes, that's what we'll do," Jeff said stubbornly. "I'll call them every night if I have to." And the cycle continued for the rest of the week.

That Saturday morning, it was bright and sunny and Jenny went out to wash the car while working on her tan. But soon she noticed the neighbors staring at her and whispering among themselves. After a few minutes, she felt so uncomfortable she went back inside, still wet and soapy, without finishing the car.

"Those people are strange," she said to Jeff. "They're just staring at me."

Jeff looked at her skeptically, laughing it off, and quipped, "Jen, you do look good in that bikini, but you're probably just imagining that people are staring at you."

That Sunday, unwelcome trash started to appear. An empty can. A food wrapper. Jeff and Jenny began finding litter in their backyard almost every day. They never saw anyone put it there, but it kept appearing. Jeff started getting concerned.

By then, Jeff wasn't thinking twice about calling the police as soon as the music started up each night. But one night after he called, there was a knock on his own front door.

"Are you Jeff Johnson?" the young police corporal asked him. Jeff nodded. "Mr. Johnson, we've been called to the house next door every night for over a week now. I did some checking back at the station. We have a noise ordinance on the books, but the music next door isn't quite loud enough to violate our law." Jeff listened with a puzzled look. "From now on, Mr. Johnson," the corporal continued, "we're going to consider it a civil matter."

4 THE BELIEVER'S GUIDE TO LEGAL ISSUES

Jeff eyed the officer for a moment, then snapped sharply, “Well, what am *I* supposed to do?”

The officer shrugged his shoulders and replied, “I guess you’d better call your lawyer.” That was more than two months ago, Jeff now recalled woefully, the first night Jenny started sleeping on the couch. And when the police stopped coming every night, it seemed like the music played louder and longer, almost as if the neighbors were gloating.

The meeting with the lawyer took about a week to schedule. He was an attorney recommended by one of Jeff’s friends, supposed to be very hard-nosed, which sounded good to Jeff.

Jenny and Jeff both had to arrange time off work to attend the appointment. To make matters worse, a surprisingly high initial retainer had to be charged to their overworked credit card before the lawyer would even agree to see them. Meanwhile, the music continued every night and the stress built.

The lawyer’s office was dimly lit and formal. And the lawyer himself looked the part, with his dark suit and graying hair. After hearing Jeff and Jenny tell their story, the lawyer soberly advised them to avoid any contact with the neighbors, as he knew from experience that confrontations could get out of control and even become physical.

“Instead,” he said dryly, “I’ll send them a little nasty-gram. I think it will get their attention.”

Another week passed before Jeff received a courtesy copy of the lawyer’s letter, as mailed to the neighbors. His face flushed with satisfaction as he eagerly tore open the envelope and read the words the lawyer had assembled. There were threats and demands and insulting characterizations. All the sorts of things Jeff dreamed of saying to the neighbors himself if he ever confronted them, plus some complicated legal jargon that sounded very impressive. For the first time in weeks, Jeff looked forward to evening. *Jenny will be back upstairs and we’ll be able to live our lives again*, he thought

to himself with a little smile. *This letter will end this mess once and for all.*

That night when the music kicked on louder and earlier than ever, Jeff and Jenny looked at each other in shocked dismay. The whole family was suffering from the nightly disruption now, and with the new school year about to start, they just couldn't take much more. Jeff's fingers trembled as he dialed the lawyer's number, ready to demand immediate action. Instead, an after-hours voice-mail service advised that regular office hours were Monday through Friday from 9 to 4, and provided a menu of messaging options, none of which promised any response whatsoever. It was yet another miserable night.

Again, it took about a week to schedule an appointment with the lawyer. Again, Jeff and Jenny had to juggle their work schedules. And again, the lawyer was asking for money. "It looks like we'll have to litigate," he said gravely. "I'll need an additional retainer and I can have the court papers ready to file within a week of payment."

Over her lunch hour, Jenny reluctantly closed out the special bank account she had started back in January with hopes of providing the family with a debt-free Christmas this year. It wasn't to be. She brought the money withdrawn from the account to the lawyer's office to pay the retainer. And meanwhile, Jeff had no inkling of the situation that would begin developing later that afternoon.

When Jenny finally got back to work, Pete, a new guy from the accounting department, was waiting in her cubicle for some software training she was supposed to supervise.

"No offense, Jenny," he said, "but you look awful. Is everything okay?"

At first Jenny had no intention of sharing the details of her circumstances with Pete, but even as she tried to give him a quick overview, her tears and her words started to flow uncontrollably. He

6 THE BELIEVER'S GUIDE TO LEGAL ISSUES

seemed to listen so intently, and he seemed so optimistic and cheerful. Just being there talking with him was making her feel better.

Lately it had become so hard for her to talk with Jeff. He was resentful of her sleeping downstairs, and he was gradually slipping into an obsession with watching the neighbors, trying desperately to catch them in the act of throwing trash into the backyard. Now he was talking about setting up surveillance cameras on the roof of the house. It was starting to get weird and she feared for Jeff's emotional well-being.

When Jenny and Pete finally got back to the software training, it was almost the end of the workday. "How about if the two of us go get a quick dinner somewhere and then stop over at my apartment to finish the training?" Pete suggested casually. "You can even stay over if you want, maybe have a quiet night's sleep for once?"

Jenny was shocked at how long she hesitated before finally mumbling, "No, I can't do that." A chill went up her spine. *Have things really gotten this bad?* she asked herself, her heart racing.

Finally, a week after the additional retainer was paid, the lawyer's secretary called Jeff to tell him the official court papers for the lawsuit were ready to be filed, as promised. It was time, Jeff proudly announced to the family, "for justice to be done." Even though he had fallen behind on some major work assignments, Jeff called in sick to the office on the day the papers were to be served by the sheriff's deputies. This would be too good to miss. He had to see the looks on the neighbors' faces when the deputies knocked on their door. In fact, he decided, he had to capture the whole thing on his new high-end video system, bought on credit just in time for the show.

Even after the papers were served, Jeff was so captivated with tracking the movements and activities of the neighbors that he wasn't especially bothered when the music started up louder than ever that evening. He knew it was only a matter of time. Soon the judge would set things straight.

And he wasn't even troubled when Jenny called from work late the next afternoon and told him she had a big project to finish and would have to stay late at the office, maybe even overnight. After all, he was perfectly capable of getting the kids dinner and putting them to bed, and then he planned to spend the rest of his evening going through catalogues featuring night-vision surveillance equipment and decibel meters. He wanted to gather some hard evidence for his day in court.

It had been a rough couple of months for him, Jenny, and the kids, but Jeff knew things were finally looking up. Their long ordeal was almost over. Or so he thought.

Now, as Jeff tossed and turned in the lonely darkness of the bedroom, it was still difficult for him to believe the shocking turn of events that began to unfold this morning, when the lawyer's secretary called him at work to say the lawyer needed an immediate consultation in light of significant developments in the case. Jeff scrambled to clear his schedule, canceling a meeting with an important customer.

When Jeff sat down across the big desk from the lawyer, the attorney's words confused him. "Counterclaim . . . malicious prosecution . . . invasion of privacy . . . harassment . . . ethnic intimidation . . . wiretapping . . . punitive damages . . . temporary injunction . . . protection from abuse order . . . criminal referral . . . district attorney's office . . . unanticipated turn of events." Jeff could feel the beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

"What in God's name is going on?" Jeff demanded. "What are you talking about?"

The lawyer began an emotionless and detached explanation that Jeff could barely follow. The lawsuit he and Jenny filed had prompted a formal counterclaim by the neighbors. The neighbors had retained an aggressive young lawyer. The young hired gun had checked through the police reports and discovered all the telephone complaints, plus the fact the music was never actually established

 8 THE BELIEVER'S GUIDE TO LEGAL ISSUES

to be in violation of the noise ordinance. The neighbors had also hired a private detective, and he had pictures of Jeff spying into their windows from the roof and lurking around their property with a video camera.

It appeared as though Jeff had even been caught trying to listen in on their conversations and telephone calls with special devices. And, it just so happened, the neighbors were recent legal immigrants and believed that Jeff's activities were part of a calculated effort to force them out of the neighborhood because of their ethnic background. And not only was it possible that significant civil damages could be assessed against Jeff and Jenny, but the local district attorney was quite interested in the whole matter and had opened a formal criminal investigation of Jeff. The lawyer then informed Jeff there was something else the private detective had captured on camera, something not actually included in the formal legal papers.

"That's it, forget it!" Jeff finally announced to the lawyer after a moment of stunned silence. "I give up—I'm withdrawing our lawsuit. We're not going to continue this. This has to end right now. Our family cannot deal with all this."

For the first time during any of their meetings, the lawyer actually looked at Jeff with a trace of emotion on his face, an expression of sympathy it appeared. Then he spoke very slowly, in a strange and different tone. "Jeff, I don't think you understand. We cannot stop this now. The counterclaim has been filed. The criminal investigation is underway. You could lose everything you own. You could go to jail. It is now beyond our control. All we can do is prepare our defense."

Again, there was a period of stunned silence as Jeff tried to grasp the implications of the unthinkable reversal. This time the lawyer's words broke the quiet. "Jeff," he said, "I'll need to double my retainer. I need payment immediately. And that may be just the beginning." Jeff gasped and shifted in his seat, unable to say anything.

Then the lawyer spoke again. “Jeff, do you know where Jenny spent last Thursday evening?”

Jeff dragged himself home in a cloud of disbelief and confusion. *How can I tell Jenny what’s happening? Or does she even care anymore? Can the information from the private detective about Jenny possibly be true? Are there really pictures of her with another man on Thursday night? It just can’t be,* he convinced himself. *If only Jenny and I can be like a normal husband and wife again, things will be fine and we can deal with these legal problems together. I’ll have to break it to her slowly at first. Tonight, if I can just spend some time with her, things will start getting better. They have to.*

But now, as Jeff lay awake, the music still thumping incessantly, reality sunk in. *I’m losing Jenny. And maybe everything else.*

More Life Lessons—Kenny and Kristen

There were warm hugs and genuine expressions of affection as the friendly little gathering was breaking up.

“We love you guys!” said Kristen, as she offered a wide smile.

“You, too! Have a great night!” Tony and Tracy replied, more or less in unison.

As the couples retired to their neighboring homes, Kristen thought aloud, “Isn’t it amazing how God can take a problem with a noisy old truck and turn it into a wonderful friendship?”

Kenny looked at her and laughed. “If God was able to take a guy like me and turn me into a decent husband, then it doesn’t surprise me he can work miracles with a noisy old truck!”

Kristen took his hand and whispered coyly, “Hey, keep it down, Miracle Man—if we’re quiet enough maybe we can get upstairs without waking the kids for a change.”

With that Kenny whispered, “It’s a deal” and began tiptoeing upstairs. Later, as Kenny was drifting off to peaceful sleep, with

10  THE BELIEVER'S GUIDE TO LEGAL ISSUES

Kristen snuggled up tightly in his arms, images of those first weeks with Tony and Tracy as neighbors started replaying in his mind like an old movie.

Tony and Tracy had just moved into the house next door. They looked very young and, like Kenny and Kristen, they had two very small children. It was early winter. Everything seemed fine at first, but then Tony began a very annoying late-night ritual.

Around 11:30 or so each night, Tony would go out and start up his rusty old truck, gunning the big engine repeatedly, literally causing the walls of Kenny and Kristen's house to shake. Finally, after about fifteen or twenty minutes of noisy idling, the rumbling old wreck would roar off loudly into the night. By this time, Kenny and Kristen's little ones would be awake and crying. It would be hours before things would settle back down.

After the third or fourth night of disruption, Kenny and Kristen were at the end of their ropes. As the engine rumbled, Kenny started getting dressed. "I've already talked to our neighbors across the street and down on the other side of Tony and Tracy," Kenny explained, "and they're all as annoyed as we are. I'm gonna go get 'em right now and we'll all go over and give our new neighbor a little lesson in courtesy."

Kristen was flustered, but had a brief flash of insight. "Kenny," she pleaded, "before you go out there tonight with those other guys, all pumped up and ready for a fight, let's please take some time and pray about this first."

Kenny reluctantly agreed and finally went back to bed. As they tried to fall back to sleep, they each asked God if there was something they should know, something they might be missing about this situation, something they needed to be sensitive to.

In the morning, Kenny suddenly remembered a Scripture verse, Matthew 18:15, in which Jesus taught about what to do if another person wronged you. "First, go to the other person privately was the basic point Jesus was making," Kenny explained to Kristen. "Last night, I almost messed that up."

Kristen shared that she had also remembered a biblical concept from Philippians 2:4: “God wants us to consider the needs of others as well as our own needs—especially because the person we’re concerned about might not even be a Christian. The way we treat that person might ultimately lead them to find Christ or drive them farther away from him.”

Kenny and Kristen quickly agreed that this situation with Tracy and Tony might be about much more than just a petty midnight inconvenience.

They decided that since they seldom saw Tracy outside, Kenny would try to go over and catch Tony when he came home from work that evening. And, instead of confronting him, Kristen would bake up a batch of cookies for Kenny to deliver. That way, maybe they could start talking a little and open the door to a more constructive discussion of the late-night noise problem.

Right away, Kenny knew they had made a wise decision. When he handed over the cookies, Tony smiled and exclaimed, “Tracy’s gonna love these! With the new baby on the way, she’s getting all kinds of cravings for sweets!” And then, hardly skipping a beat, Tony’s expression turned very serious. “Hey, neighbor, by the way, I owe you an apology. I know my old truck makes a heck of a racket at night. Tracy’s been working the midnight to 7 shift down at the truck stop—she gets double time. If she can hang in there for another month or so, we’ll have enough saved up to buy a better set of wheels. And then she’s quitting for good. I’ve been going out and getting the truck warmed up for her on these cold nights—in her condition I just don’t think she should be sitting out in the cold and that heater ain’t worth nothing until the engine gets good and hot.”

Kenny was overwhelmed with appreciation for Kristen’s counsel to pray before acting. He had almost gone out and verbally attacked a man who was only doing his best to take care of his pregnant wife. “Thank you, God,” Kenny prayed silently.

As Kenny turned for home, something else hit him, a little spark of an idea, and he walked back to his neighbor’s door. “Hey, Tony,”

12  THE BELIEVER'S GUIDE TO LEGAL ISSUES

he said, "I have something I want you to consider. My car has a good heater and it's a little more comfortable for a pregnant lady than that old beast of yours. Tracy gets back here by about 7:15 in the mornings, right?" Tony nodded cautiously. "Well, I don't leave for work until 7:30. How about if I give you a set of keys Tracy can use to drive my car to work until she's ready to quit? That way, you won't have to wake the neighborhood every night and your little princess can ride in style. If you'll promise to put some gas in it once in a while, I'll bring you my extra set of keys after supper tonight."

Tony stood there grinning. "Neighbor, you've got yourself a bargain!" he finally pronounced gleefully, locking onto Kenny's hand to seal the deal. Even now, years later, Kenny could still vividly remember the enthusiasm in Tony's voice and the powerful grip of that pumping handshake.

And as Kenny finally drifted off to sleep, reflecting peacefully, his last waking thoughts were of the day Tony and Tracy stood up and accepted Jesus at a church service he and Kristen had invited them to, and of the miracle of how their friendship had grown over the years to become a true bond of brotherhood and sisterhood in Christ.

Biblical Insights

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.
—Matthew 5:9*

Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.—Matthew 5:25

And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.—Matthew 5:40–41

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.
—Romans 12:19

If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother goes to law against another—and this in front of unbelievers! 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 6:1–7

"All things are lawful," but not all things are beneficial. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of others.—1 Corinthians 10:23–24 (NRSV)

Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.—1 Thessalonians 5:15

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.—Matthew 18:15–17

A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense.—Proverbs 19:11

Practical Counsel

Imagine you're a golfer. You lose a golf ball in a patch of poison ivy. There's a big sign right there: DANGER—POISON IVY—KEEP OUT! YOU'LL BE TOTALLY MISERABLE IF YOU SET FOOT IN HERE! But it's a brand new ball you lost; and nobody tells *you* what to do. And it's just not fair that *your* ball is lost. And the whole principle of the thing just isn't right. So you go straight into the poison ivy patch, digging around, crawling around, until finally you come climbing out with your ball in hand, a little scratched and dirty, but you got your ball back. Now, in a day or so, you're going to wish you had never set foot anywhere near that poison ivy! You'll be so itchy and miserable that you would trade a million new golf balls just to be able to do it over again differently.

Do you think this illustration is absurd? Unrealistic? Well, that's the very sort of warning God has given us when it comes to litigation. If you read the Bible, you'll see that God has essentially posted a big sign in front of the courthouse: DANGER—POISON IVY—KEEP OUT!

Following God's biblical advice frees us from the kind of bondage and misery so often caused by typical secular attitudes toward disputes. How many times have you heard someone say, "Nobody takes advantage of me" or "I don't get mad, I get even"? That kind of thinking is so prevalent. And many secular attorneys just feed right into it, leading their clients down a path of grief and destruction. It appears some lawyers even play up their clients' emotions, as if they are trying to encourage lawsuits to gain more and more litigation business for themselves.

I've observed the emotional, physical, and economic toll that lawsuits and litigation can take on people. But Scripture teaches something totally different. Jesus Christ has a different plan for his children. He doesn't want us to be drawn into all that anguish and



frustration. He has a different plan for us. He wants us to find joy and peace.

God strongly discourages Christians from being drawn into the trap of lawsuits and other litigation. A Christian empowered by God's Word is encouraged to step back and look at the big picture. And a person who dares to become the peacemaker in a hostile situation has a unique opportunity to experience the full blessing God has promised. As Christians, whenever we find ourselves embroiled in a conflict, even one in which we perceive we are the innocent party, before we do anything else, we need to first stop and pray, "God, can you show me how to become a peacemaker in the midst of this ugly mess?"

"Blessed are the peacemakers," Jesus said. That's such a hopeful statement for our world of ceaseless conflict and multiplying legal battles. But is it practical or just a pie-in-the-sky concept, some nice-sounding idealistic words? Thankfully, by the amazing work of God, Christian mediation and reconciliation are being rediscovered as legitimate alternatives to litigation and dispute (see chapter 13). As individual Christians, we can be actively working to bring about healing, resolution, and forgiveness in every situation we face. And for a watching world, every conflict turned into friendship and every dispute resolved amicably can become a powerful testimony of how Christ can take something Satan intends for evil and turn it around for good!

As a lawyer, I could profit financially by inflaming my clients' anger and stirring up their passion for immediate and satisfying revenge. But what would be the long-term result? More pain, more hurt, more misery for everyone involved. Instead, what if I encourage my clients to focus on an *eternal* perspective? If we really believe God is who he says he is, then we can leave it up to God to take care of any vengeance that might be required. After all, Scripture says that's his department, not ours. And meanwhile, we can help bring about healed hearts, reconciled relationships, and saved souls. We can help bring glory to Jesus Christ.

16  THE BELIEVER'S GUIDE TO LEGAL ISSUES

So, as Christians, what are we supposed to do if we're injured or hurt by someone else? How should we respond? Do we lash out and try to enforce all our "rights"? Do we seek to get "everything we deserve," like they promote in all those lawyers' commercials? Or do we respond by seeking reconciliation, as Jesus taught?

I believe that one of the hardest teachings in all Christianity is the notion of "turning the other cheek," the idea of "going the second mile" with someone who has done us wrong. We can read Christ's words about this in the gospels, we can understand them intellectually, but living them out when someone has hurt us is a different story. To me, it all comes down to the concept of grace.

Grace. We usually think of grace as a fancy church word, something theology professors might talk about. And yes, grace is a deep concept, with major theological implications, but it's also something very real that makes Christians different from the rest of the world. So how does grace fit in with reconciliation?

As Christian believers, we know that God sent his son, Jesus Christ, to die for us, so we, as condemned sinners, could be forgiven, set free, and reconciled to God. God did all that for us even though we don't deserve it, even though we really deserve punishment. So God responds to *our* mistakes (and even our intentional actions against him) not by asserting all his "rights" or by subjecting us to "everything we deserve." Instead, God gives us an incredible, undeserved gift of forgiveness. As Christians, shouldn't we do the same thing when other people make mistakes that hurt us? Aren't we in fact commanded to do so by Jesus Christ, whom we claim as Lord of our lives?

In the Lord's Prayer, Christ tells us we'll be forgiven as we forgive others. In one of his parables, Jesus taught about the king who forgave one of his servants, a servant who was in debt to the king so deeply he could *never* pay him back. The servant was extremely grateful to the king. But then the servant ran into a man who owed him a small amount of money. Instead of following the king's

example of undeserved forgiveness, the servant treated the man very harshly, having him thrown in jail because he wouldn't repay. Well, when the king heard about that, he was, needless to say, terribly disappointed his servant didn't follow his example. It seems to me Christ told this story to encourage us to follow God's example of grace, extending forgiveness even to those who don't deserve it. As followers of Christ, instead of suing a person who hurts us, we must prayerfully consider forgiving the person instead, just as God has forgiven us.

So, to paraphrase a question posed in a typical lawyers' advertisement, "You're a Christian. You've been in a serious auto accident or hurt on the job. Now what?" The lawyers' ad would probably tell you to open the yellow pages and call a personal injury hotline to start your lawsuit. But is the yellow pages really the first place Christians should turn when they think they might have a legal claim? I have a much better idea. When we as Christians get hurt, are in an accident, or have any other reason to think we might have the "right" to sue someone else, let's not open the telephone book. Let's open *the* Book, God's Book, the Bible!

When you look through the attorneys' section in the yellow pages, what kind of words do you see? *Aggressive Representation. Get the Results You Deserve. Protect Your Rights. Enforce Your Rights.* Words that play to our egos, to our selfish desires to get the most for ourselves. But when you open the Bible, what kinds of words do you see? *Reconcile with your brother. Blessed are the peacemakers. Turn the other cheek. Go with him the second mile.* Exactly the opposite of what we see or hear in most lawyers' ads.

As Christians, we have to be alert and careful not to get caught up in the world's destructive ways. Lashing out at others to get all you can from them might feel satisfying at first, but it only leads to more pain and misery for everyone involved (including ourselves).

Now, I understand that many good, competent attorneys advertise in the yellow pages, and I'm not trying to criticize their

18  THE BELIEVER'S GUIDE TO LEGAL ISSUES

skills or legal ethics. I'm just saying that the typical secular response of suing those who have hurt you is directly contrary to what Jesus taught. Jesus' words are all about reconciliation. The yellow pages advertisements are all about revenge.

Is there another way? An alternative to man's law, an alternative to the destructive human desire for revenge? Yes. The alternative is God's law. God's focus is on reconciling and restoring that which has been broken by sin. God's law encourages confession, forgiveness, and restoration of mutual respect. It's the opposite of humanity's revenge-driven system. Under God's law, the goal is *construction, not destruction*.

When it comes to lawsuits, the Bible does not portray a positive picture. In fact, God has essentially *nothing* good to say about lawsuits. In the Bible, God specifically tells us to keep out of lawsuits with other believers. Many Christians seem to be at least somewhat familiar with this idea. But many, many Christians seem to be genuinely surprised God also teaches us to keep out of lawsuits with nonbelievers. That doesn't leave us with much litigation, does it? As I've studied the issue, it has surprised me to learn how strongly God discourages Christians from becoming involved in litigation of any kind.

But why does God want us to keep out of lawsuits? Could it be he just doesn't like lawyers? After all, lawyers were always giving Jesus a hard time, trying to trip him up with trick questions and devious word traps. Jesus would have every reason to hate lawyers. It seems like everybody else does! But Jesus isn't the type to hold a grudge like that. So why *do* you think God wants Christians to stay out of lawsuits? We know how hurtful litigation can be for those involved, and obviously God does not want to see his children getting needlessly hurt, but is there something more? Is there some other reason God warns us to avoid lawsuits?

I suspect we can find the key in the concepts explained by the apostle Paul in the tenth chapter of 1 Corinthians. All things are

lawful, Paul teaches, but not all things are beneficial. All things are lawful, Paul reminds us, but not all things build up (v. 23). And then, turning the world's wisdom upside down (and especially upsetting the prevailing wisdom in the secular legal arena), Paul challenges us not to seek our own advantage, but that of the other! (v. 24). Why? So, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, Paul admonishes us, do everything for the glory of God! (v. 31). And to what end? Paul finally reveals his underlying purpose, his ultimate strategy: "Give no offense to Jews or Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved" (vv. 32–33 NRSV). It's evangelism!

God wants us to take the focus off our own selfish concerns and put our focus where it belongs, on the salvation of souls. God knows lawsuits are almost always based on people seeking their own advantage, and he wants us to do just the opposite. God wants us to quit seeking our own advantage and start seeking to build up his kingdom. I think that's the deep, core reason God tells us to stay out of lawsuits and litigation, especially when nonbelievers are involved.

Having the local sheriff or constable serve someone with legal papers and then dragging that person before a judge and jury surely isn't the ideal way to show them Christ's love! God wants our focus to be on winning souls to Christ. Salvation and eternal judgment hang in the balance, and that's one verdict no courtroom judge or jury has the power to decide.

And how about when Christians sue fellow Christians? We've already alluded to the Christian perspective on lawsuits among believers. The Bible is very clear we Christians are not to sue one another in the secular courts. And it's in the form of a warning that when one of us takes another to court, all of us lose! That means the plaintiff loses, the defendant loses, and worst of all, the church of Jesus Christ loses in the eyes of an already skeptical world. Who's

20  THE BELIEVER'S GUIDE TO LEGAL ISSUES

going to want to join a religion where members talk about loving each other but end up fighting each other in court? Litigation among believers is truly a “lose-lose” situation!

Am I saying it's a sin for a Christian to take someone to court? I don't remember there being an eleventh commandment: “You shall not sue.” So it may not be an outright sin against God to file a lawsuit against someone, but it is clearly something God's Word does not recommend for us. I believe God's Word is the “owner's manual” for us as human beings. We might not always agree with or like what the Bible suggests, but God knows exactly what is good for us and what can hurt us, and when he tells us to avoid lawsuits, I take that very seriously.

In the fictional illustrations I've shared at the beginning of this chapter, the scenarios might be considered by some as being rather trivial. Perhaps, a reader might ask, I can forgive my neighbor for making excessive noise, but what if a close family member has been severely injured or even killed as a result of someone else's negligence? Then what? It is indeed a sobering situation, one in which the aggrieved persons will need to seek much prayerful counsel and support. But I have found nothing in God's Word to limit his teachings on litigation to trivial matters only. I am forced to conclude that God desires us to avoid litigation over even the most serious offenses.

As Christians, we can be proactive in living out God's teaching on lawsuits and other litigation, seeing the big picture from a Christian perspective, and choosing to avoid subjecting ourselves and others to the grief, anxiety, and frustration that accompanies almost every court case. I've practiced law for many years, yet I can't recall a plaintiff or a defendant having fun or talking about what a great experience litigation has been, or a nonbeliever professing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior as a result of a lawsuit.