

**Psalm 20:5-6** We will shout for joy at your victory and triumph in the Name of our God; may the LORD grant all your requests. Now I know that the LORD gives victory to his anointed; he will answer him out of his holy heaven, with the victorious strength of his right hand.

### **Introduction**

If I were to ask you what you do for a living, you'd use the verb "to be" to answer. At any social event, when asked what I do, I say, "I'm a priest." (The responses to this statement are amusing!) The "am" in my statement is telling. I identify myself with my occupation in the world. "I'm a doctor." "I'm a lawyer." "I'm a teacher." Etc. While, yes, people understand you are describing your occupation or vocation in the world, there's also a lot of assuming and judging going on about who you are. If a doctor, then you must be smart. If a teacher, you're kind. A lawyer...depends, who's side are you on? A person's activity in the world tells us who someone is; or we think it should. When we call someone a liar, it's because they lie. A thief is one who steals. A murderer, one who kills.

We assume we can pinpoint who and what someone is based on their activity and presence in the world. If you are smart you will act smart, not acting smart must mean the opposite: dumb. We then create a binary of actions resulting in good or bad, right or wrong. A good person does good things; a bad person does bad things. A good person does the right thing and a bad person does the wrong thing. And then we create a system by which we treat people according to our judgments about them based on their actions and presence in the world. Good people who do good things are good and deserve good treatment; bad people who do bad things are bad and deserve bad treatment. We determine the worth of a person based on their good actions or their bad actions—life is expendable when you're bad (or have any history of bad) verses when you're good. We assume we know who someone is as a person by what they do in the world and how they conform to our binaric paradigm of good and bad/right and wrong.

A question haunts me here. What about me? Am I good? If I define myself through my actions and my adherence to the cultural standards of good or bad, right or wrong, then I can determine I'm good or bad. If I do good and right, I am good and right. But what happens when I do bad and wrong? Am I now bad and wrong? Is there any hope for me even if all my actions conflict with what we determine is good and right?

According to Paul, there is.

### **2 Corinthians 5:14-17**

For the love of Christ is holding us together, because we are convinced of this that one died on behalf of all people, therefore all people died. And he died on behalf of all, so

that the ones who are alive live no longer for themselves but to/for the one who died and was raised on their behalf. (2 Cor. 5:14-15)<sup>1</sup>

In our 2 Corinthians passage for today, Paul continues with the theme of bodies and perception that he began in 4:13-5:1. In vv. 5:6-8 Paul mentions that while we are at home here in this mortal body, we're absent/exiled from the Lord. This isn't dualistic thinking; but a distinction between that which can be perceived and that which cannot be perceived. Even though we are, right now, in Christ through faith by the power of the Holy Spirit, our hearts long to be in our eternal and glorified bodies like Christ and with Christ.<sup>2</sup> For Paul, this desire motivates his actions. Paul works in his mortal body to please the Lord<sup>3</sup> through his words and deeds in proclaiming Christ crucified and raised as the divine act of Love seeking the Beloved in the world. Yet, Paul—walking with Christ by faith<sup>4</sup>—longs for the consummation of the union with Christ in a real and bodily way that will come with death when he shows up at the throne of Christ.<sup>5</sup> At this throne, Paul explains, those of us who walked by faith in the body receive that which belongs to us and that which was lost, whether we did or endured good or bad<sup>6</sup>—not status or destiny is determined, but a sober assessment of what we did as those who claimed Christ and walked in the law of Love of God and Neighbor.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Translation mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Murray J. Harris *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* NIGTC Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2005. 395-6. Εκ/εν “Paul has in mind the physical body as the locus of human existence on earth, the frail and mortal σωμα ψυχικον. His thought here is neither dualistic...nor derogatory. He is affirming that to be living on earth in a physical body inevitably means distance—indeed exile—from the risen Lord, who lives in heaven in a spiritual body. To be εν Χριστω does not yet mean to be συν Χριστω...Unlike Christ, Paul had his residence on earth, not heaven, but he recognized that this true home, his ultimate residence, was προς τον κυριον (v. 8); in this sense he was an exile, absent from this home with the Lord...And if an exile, also a pilgrim...But as well as regarding his separation from Christ as ‘spatial,’ Paul may have viewed it as ‘somatic.’ It is not simply a case of Christ’s being ‘there’ and the Christians’ being ‘here’; until Christians have doffed their earthly bodies and donned their heavenly, they are separated from their Lord by the difference between two modes of being, the σωμα ψυχικον and the σωμα πνευματικον.”

<sup>3</sup> Harris 2 *Corinthians* 405, “Whatever his lot, Paul was always .... Possessed of confidence in God as the fulfiller of his promises (v.6) and always...desirous of pleasing Christ (v.9).”

<sup>4</sup> Harris 2 *Corinthians* 398, “...to walk in faith...is to keep the eye focused on things not yet visible...and not to have the gaze fixed on things already present to sight...”

<sup>5</sup> Harris 2 *Corinthians* 397-8, “The separation, Paul answers, is relative not absolute: though absent from sight, the Lord is present to faith, yet it is not until he is present also to sight that Christian existence will reach its true goal of consummated fellowship with him. Residence in the earthly σκηνος implies not the absence or unreality of communion with Christ, but simply its imperfection during the course of the Christian’s earthly life.”

<sup>6</sup> I’m playing with the definition of κομιζω (the first principle part of κομισηται, an aorist middle subjunctive 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular verb) in v.10.

<sup>7</sup> Harris 2 *Corinthians* 408-9, “Since, then, the tribunal of Christ is concerned with the assessment of works, not the determination of destiny, it will be apparent that the Pauline concepts of justification on the basis of faith and recompense in accordance with works may be complementary. Not status but reward is determined...for justification as the acquisition of a right standing before God anticipates the verdict of the Last Judgment. But, already delivered from εργα νομου...’ by justifying faith, the Christian is presently committed to το εργον της πιστεως...’action stemming from faith,’ which will be assessed and rewarded at Christ’s tribunal.” And, “...for Paul this φανερωθηναι involved the appearance and examination before Christ’s tribunal of every Christian without

In vv. 14-15, Paul proclaims that Christ's love<sup>8</sup> for the world and in our hearts sustains and holds us together on this journey in the world walking by faith in mortal bodies—this love is the animation of our work in word and deed in the world. Christ's death on the cross exemplifies how much Christ loved all of humanity. Paul explains that Christ died for all, and in that Christ died for all, all have died. The words are simple, but the thought isn't. In our feeble human judgment of who is good and who is bad, we determined Jesus was worthy of being crucified and Barabbas was to be set free. What Christ's crucifixion indicates is that we are, flat out, poor judges of people based on externals. We had God in our midst—the very source of life—and we sentenced God to death releasing instead one of our own who was very much prone to breaking the law and taking life. In the crucifixion of Christ, we are exposed...exposed unto death. This is the real death of which Paul speaks:<sup>9</sup> We are rent unto dust, the very dust from which we are taken. Our wrath at the good, our sin, put Christ on the cross and Christ suffers our sinful judgment; what we didn't realize is that we died, too, by our own judgment in that event of exposure.

But God. But God in God's vindication of good, of Christ, of God's self, raises Jesus from the dead. And overhauls *everything* we did, have done, and will do. With Christ, God raises us, giving us life and not death. God's love of reconciliation and restoration eclipses God's retribution. We are given life, when our actions begged for a death sentence. Therefore, we live no longer for ourselves in selfish ambition but for "the one who died and was raised on behalf of all people." And if we live for the one who died and was raised for all people, then we live for those whom Christ died and was raised.<sup>10, 11</sup> And this necessitates, according to Paul, a complete change resulting in refusal to categorically determine someone based on their presence and action in the world.<sup>12</sup> We lost that right—if we ever had it—when we told Pontius Pilate to crucify God.

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exception for the purpose of receiving an exact and impartial recompense (including the receipt or deprivation of commendation) which would be based on deeds, both good and bad, performed through the earthly body. The fear inspired by this expectation ... doubtless intensified Paul's ambition that his life should meet with Christ's approval both during life and at the βῆμα..."

<sup>8</sup> Harris 2 *Corinthians* 419, "No one doubts that believer's love for Christ motivates their action, but here Paul is concentrating on an earlier stage of motivation, namely the love shown by Christ in dying for humankind."

<sup>9</sup> Harris 2 *Corinthians* 422, "When Christ died, all died; what is more, his death involved their death....But if...παντες is universal in scope in vv. 14-15, this death maybe the death deservedly theirs becomes of sin, or an objective 'ethical' death that must be appropriate subjectively by individual faith, or a collective participation in the event of Christ's death by which sin's power was destroyed. It is certainly more appropriate to see this αποθανειν of the παντες as an actual 'death' than as a potential 'death.'"

<sup>10</sup> Harris 2 *Corinthians* 422, "Replacing the slavery to self that is the hallmark of the unregenerate state should be an exclusive devotion to the crucified and resurrect Messiah. The intended result of the death of Christ was the Christians' renunciation of self-seeking and self-pleasing and the pursuit of a Christ-centered life filled with action for the benefit of others, as was Christ's life..."

<sup>11</sup> Harris 2 *Corinthians* 430, "A new attitude toward Jesus Christ prompts a new outlook on those for whom Christ died...When we come to share God's view of Christ...we also gain his view of people in general."

<sup>12</sup> Harris 2 *Corinthians* 434, "Christian conversion, that is, coming to be in Christ, produces dramatic change...: Life is not longer lived κατα σαρκα, but κατα πνευμα. Paul implies that a change of attitude toward Christ (v. 16b)

## Conclusion

So then from now on we, **we** perceive no one according to the flesh. Even if we have known Christ according to the flesh, but now we no longer know/do so. Therefore, if anyone [is] in Christ, [there is] a new creation/creature; the old order is rendered void, behold! a new order has come into being. (2 Cor. 5:16-17)

With intentional emphasis, Paul exhorts us: Christians are categorically forbidden from determining someone's value, worth, dignity, right to life, (etc.) based on their actions. Paul minces no words here as he climactically exclaims: *Behold! A new order has come into being!* If anything functions to be determinative of Christian praxis and existence in the world it's that we don't determine personhood and human dignity based on human activity and presence in the world.<sup>13</sup> We participate in the divine activity of Love seeking the Beloved in our new ordering of our freedom for and toward others and not strictly for ourselves in selfish gain—this is the call of those who follow Jesus out of the Jordan.<sup>14</sup> We dare to proclaim in the face of opposition that in all instances this one is human and worthy of life and dignity and honor...when they're wrong or even when they've done something bad. We're the ones who reject categorical determination of someone based on their actions, and especially refuse prejudging people based on their differences from the dominant culture. Those who walk by faith in this mortal body, are ushered into a new order of things. We reject anything having to do with a hierarchy of human being based on anything but that which cannot be perceived.<sup>15</sup> While there are consequences for actions, none of those consequences can equate to a loss of human dignity and worth and life.

This means we mustn't have anything to do with prejudice of any type: skin color, gender, sex, sexuality, ability, and class. It means that Christians must let others tell them who they are and allow the complexity of human existence manifest rather than cut them off with assumptions and judgments because of what they look like, how they act, or how they are different than

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brings about a change or attitude toward other people (v.1 6a) and a change of conduct from self-pleasing to Christ-pleasing (vv. 9, 15), from egocentricity to theocentricity."

<sup>13</sup> Harris *2 Corinthians* 429, "First, Paul is rejecting (in v. 16a) any assessment of human beings that is based on the human or worldly preoccupation with externals. It was now his custom to view people, not primarily in terms of nationality but in terms of spiritual status....Paul is repudiating (in v. 16c) as totally erroneous his sincere yet superficial preconception estimate of Jesus as a misguided messianic pretender, a crucified heretic, whose followers must be extirpated, for he had come to recognize the Nazarene as the divinely appointed Messiah whose death under the divine curse...in fact brought life..."

<sup>14</sup> Harris *2 Corinthians* 434, "When a person becomes a Christian, he or she experiences a total restructuring of life that alters its whole fabric—thinking, feeling, willing, and acting. Anyone who is 'in Christ' is 'Under New Management' and has 'Altered Priorities Ahead,' to use the working sometimes found in shop windows and ...on roads. And the particle ἰδοὺ...functions like a such a sign, stimulating attention; but here it conveys also a sense of excitement and triumph."

<sup>15</sup> Harris *2 Corinthians* 427, "Paul is affirming that with the advent of the era of salvation in Christ, and ever since his own conversion to Christ, he has ceased making superficial, mechanical judgments about other people on the basis of outward appearances—such as national origin, social status, intellectual capability, physical attributes, or even charismatic endowment and pneumatic displays...."

what the status-quo determines is good and right, as The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr explains.<sup>16</sup> It means, no matter what, we stand—by the law of Love in our hearts—with those whom society deems unworthy and undignified, this is part of the new order we are reborn into in our encounter with God in the event of faith, as the Rev. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz declares.<sup>17</sup> It means that we—in our Christ born freedom and creative disobedience—reject any created order that is claimed to be the one and only way/life on earth, which categorically forces people to be against who they are in body, mind, and spirit to the point of destruction, referring to what Frau Prof. Dr. Dorothee Sölle teaches.<sup>18</sup> And it means, with The Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, that we participate with God in “bearing the memory of Christ in the world...[and] being the change that is God’s heaven.”<sup>19</sup>

***[B]ehold! a new order has come into being***

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart” *A Strength to Love* “The toughminded person always examines the facts before he reaches conclusions; in short, he postjudges. The tenderminded person reaches a conclusion before he has examined the first fact; in short he prejudges and is prejudiced.”

<sup>17</sup> Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz *Mujerista Theology* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996. 88. “The paradigmatic shift ai am proposing calls for solidarity as the appropriate present-day expression of the gospel mandate that we love our neighbor. This commandment, which encapsulates the gospel message, is the goal of Christianity. I believe salvation depends on love of neighbor , and because love of neighbor today should be expressed through solidarity, solidarity can and should be considered the *wine qua non* of salvation. This means that we have to be very clear about who ‘our neighbor’ is. Our neighbor, according to Matthew 25, is the least of our sisters and brothers. Neighbors are the poor, the oppressed, for whom we must have a preferential option, This we cannot have apart from being in solidary with them.”

<sup>18</sup> Dorothee Sölle *Creative Disobedience* Trans. Lawrence W. Deneff. Eugen, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1995. (Original: *Phantasie und Gehorsam: Überlegungen zu einer künftigen chrstlichen Ethik* Stuttgart: Kreuz Verlag, 1968). “In traditional usage one speaks rather descriptively of ‘fulfilling’ obedience. The picture is that of a container of form which must be filled. So too with obedience. A previously existing order is postulate that must be maintained, defended, or fulfilled. But Jesus did not conceive of the world according to a model of completed order, which person were merely required to maintain. The world he enters had not yet reached perfection. It was alterable, in fact, it awaited transformation. Schemes of order are in Jesus’ words utterly destroyed—great and small, scholar and child, riches and poverty, knowledge of the Law and ignorance. Jesus did everything in his power to relativize these orders and set free the person caught up in these schemes. This process of liberation is called ‘Gospel.’ Ought obedience then still be thought of as the Christian’s greatest glory?” And, “I detect that we need new words to describe the revolutionary nature of all relationships begun in Christ. At the very least it is problematic whether we can even continue to consider that which Jesus wanted under the term obedience.” pp. 27-28

<sup>19</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015. 224. And, “The church is compelled as bearer of the memory of Jesus to step into the space of the Trayvons and Jordans who don’t know whether to walk slow or walk fast in order to stay alive. To step into their space is what it means for the church to being the past, which is Jesus, into the presence crucifying realities of stand-your-ground culture. Moreover, it is only when one an enter int the space of crucified class, with sympathetic understanding, that one is able to realize what is required for he salvation of God, which is justice, to be made manifest in our world.” 201-2.