

I Corinthians 5:1-13
II Corinthians 1:23-2:11

PAUL'S JUDGMENT

I try to imagine what it must have been like for Paul as he preached and taught and lived among the Corinthians. He was a Pharisee born and bred, a rabbinical student immersed in Old Testament standards. Corinth, on the other hand, had the reputation for being the worst, the most immoral, the most decadent city in the Eastern empire. I wonder if Paul didn't go to bed at night saying to himself, "What am I doing here?" and longing for the sane and clearer standards of home.

A few years earlier, the mere thought of eating with anyone who was not a strict, practicing Jew would have been repulsive to Paul – a serious sin, a desecration, a blasphemy. But Paul waived all of that. He fought off the in-bred guilt, the old patterns of thought and belief. He took up courage with both hands and broke from centuries of tradition – in order to carry the Gospel of Jesus Christ beyond the borders of Judaism. You cannot carry the Message of God's love to people you yourself will not love. We all need to grow and learn and change and improve, but in the light of the Gospel we *start out* valuable, worthwhile, accepted, important, precious. We do not end up that way – we *start out* that way. In the poker game of the Gospel, claiming that value and worth for ourselves and others is what we all ante in. That's for openers. Without that, we cannot play. We do not make it true, but by the power and authority of Christ, we claim and accept that truth for ourselves and for others – or we cannot play. This we all know. Yet this we do not believe nearly enough or clearly enough, especially not for ourselves.

So Paul turned his back on a lifetime of moral precepts, faithful rituals, and deep-rooted prejudices. Or at least he tried to. His inner security, his outer reputation, his very understanding of who he was and what was expected of him had all come unglued on the road to Damascus. Now he had bet everything on a seemingly uncredentialed carpenter from Nazareth who said that God was not like what everybody had supposed God to be like. God does not lay out all the rules and expectations and then love only those who live up to them. God loves first! And all the rules and expectations – at least the authentic ones – are simply principles of how life works best, and in turn gets more beautiful and satisfying and exciting as we go. We do not obey them to get loved. *Because we are loved*, they are of great interest. We

don't take out the garbage in order to get loved. Well, actually, a lot of people do, but it doesn't work that way. On the other hand, if you are already loved, it makes a lot of sense to take out the garbage. Life gets better that way.

So the final word and the big word about God is: LOVE. The Carpenter reversed everything. You do not end with the love of God; you start out with the LOVE of God. You do not end with the reward of Heaven; you start out with the promise of Heaven. You do not go to Heaven because you are good enough, or get good enough; you go to Heaven because God is good enough. You do not work to achieve God's acceptance and favor; you work because you have already received God's acceptance and favor. Striving is no longer a desperate, fear-driven bid to survive. Striving is an act of gratitude, a way of saying "Thank You" to the God who will never let you go or let you be destroyed. The only fear is of disappointing this God – letting God down, making him sad. That is the only punishment left: the more we experience love, the more we hate the idea of hurting God. Indeed, this strange new WAY of the Carpenter did change everything. Most people could not believe it. Most people still do not. In the end, when there was no other way left, the Carpenter punctuated His Message with His willingness to die for the truth He had proclaimed. And when the dust cleared, it still spelled LOVE – in capital letters like the world had never seen before. And not just human love – *God's LOVE*.

It had changed Paul's life, as only love can – deeply, drastically, from minor details to the core of his most cherished beliefs. So finally Paul had come to Corinth also, with the news that God loves – and that God loves everyone, even Corinthians. Paul knew it was true, believed it deeply. But it was still almost more than his old Jewish heart could handle.

So there he was in Corinth, eating food that was forbidden; breaking bread with people who did not wash or know the prayers; calling people "friend" and "sister" and "soulmate" who had not even read Torah, never mind kept it. If Jesus was wrong – if Jesus was not truly the Messiah – then Paul's goose was cooked but good, burnt beyond repair. But Paul wasn't much worried about that anymore. Jesus he trusted. The problem was that the Message kept getting bigger and being bigger than he had bargained for. How do you track a God of love – the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ – through a city like

Corinth? Meaning, what happens when you try to be faithful to the Gospel in the real world? How do you start a church – a community of Christians who will live for the New Kingdom – in a very mundane and corrupt world? And people kept asking questions, so many questions! How shall we live? What is forbidden? What are the patterns by which we can bear witness? Should we eat meat from the pagan temples? What if we are converted but our spouses are still pagans and don't want anything to do with Jesus? What if we work for pagans who tell us to do things we think Jesus would hate? If the Gospel is love and mercy and forgiveness, what are the new rules? *Are there* any rules left?

Sometimes Paul answered the questions like the Jew he had always been. Sometimes he answered like the Christian he was and was becoming. If you do not know that, you miss the drama of the Corinthian letters. You miss the pilgrimage Paul himself was on. That might mean you are not yet aware of the transformation Christ is trying to make in your own life. Lock the letters of Paul into strings of holy words – all unerring, all equal in truth and value – and The Book dies. The throb and pulse of life are stamped out of it. Paul was a man, a flesh-and-blood man – a beautiful, terrible, wonderful man – a man struggling with a Message and a truth too big for mortal humans to handle. But struggle he did and must. The world must know. It is our only hope. Yet much of Paul's value to us is his struggle – his life and work and words, pilgrim to pilgrim, mortal to mortal. Turn him into a “cellophane saint” and the value is gone. He becomes a mere statue, even a symbol of the very stance and attitude that he himself had turned away from.

Anyway, Paul had his hands full in Corinth. It was his biggest breakthrough, and it broke far beyond Judaism. He was dealing with people who did not know things that Paul assumed everybody knew. The codes of behavior were different. Today it is called “culture shock.” Corinthians did things without a twinge of conscience that made Paul cringe just to think about. Paul stayed for about two years in Corinth, which, as you know, broke all his previous patterns of ministry. Guess who was joining the church? Not rabbinical students from Jerusalem. Pagans from Corinth. So even after Paul moved on, the letters kept flying – both ways. We only have a few of them, and fragments of some of the others.

Sometimes Paul just used common sense, and the Corinthians thought it sounded reasonable. Sometimes he blasted them, and they

couldn't understand why he was so steamed-up over minor details. Sometimes he shared his own vision and faith, and they felt their hearts lifted and inspired. Some thought Paul was great, some thought him pedantic, and some, after having learned from him, thought that they now understood things better than he did. The factions grew, and it has been that way ever since.

One of Paul's biggest hassles at Corinth was over sexual behavior. When Paul talked about freedom and love, the Corinthians did not always hear it the way he meant it. He was talking about freedom beyond the Law, and they had not even gotten *to* the Law yet. So when Paul heard about the case of open incest right in the middle of the Christian community, he lost it. That was more than his Jewish heart could handle. The letter he wrote was smoking all the way to Corinth, and it burst into flames the minute they opened it. Only, it was not the fire of the Holy Spirit. It was the fire from Sinai, the Holy Mountain: wrath and judgment. For the moment at least, Paul had forgotten his new Message. The Gospel was swept aside, and Paul was his old self again. You remember him that way before Damascus: "*But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord*" Once you develop a taste for killing Christians, it is a hard habit to break.

From I Corinthians 5:1-5:

It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. For though absent in body I am present in spirit, and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. [Or if you prefer another translation: ... consign this man to Satan for the destruction of his body, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord. (NEB)]

The tragedy, of course, is that Paul is not allowed his own humanity. Because this letter is part of the New Testament canon, Paul is not permitted his right to be wrong. So this passage, coming from the heat of one of Paul's worst and wrongest moments, is stacked right alongside his best and highest insights. As some of you may realize, we just read

the passage that built and supported the Inquisition. Kill the body to save the soul! That is doubtless not what Paul ever intended, but that is what it was used for. If God didn't hide it from him, Paul must have spent those Inquisition years in Hell – listening to people thundering his words as a justification for sadistic murder in the name of Jesus Christ.

To be sure, it was Paul's concern – his passion and hope for the church to become great and good – that made him angry in the first place. But the error was tragic. For one short chapter, Paul was afraid to trust the Gospel: afraid that love would not be big enough or tough enough to deal with sin; afraid that love could not win out in the end. So he reverted to kind: back to the safety of the old ways of the world; back to judgment and condemnation; back to anger and punishment. And here it is, printed still today in the Holy Book – which people are taught to read without question and to follow without understanding. The church has used this one to burn, to torture, and to kill. Satan not only quotes Scripture, he *wrote* some of it. And this passage will remain for every literalist and unwary Christian to stumble on and make mayhem with.

From I Corinthians 5:5-13:

You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral men; not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But rather I wrote to you not to associate with any one who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber – not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "Drive out the wicked person from among you."

What we learn from the fifth chapter of First Corinthians is that Paul could be dead wrong. He was not wrong because we have a right to our own opinions. He was not wrong because we like to be sentimental,

or because we disagree with the Inquisition. He was wrong because, in this instance, he went against his Lord. This was not the way Jesus dealt with the woman caught in adultery. This was not the way Jesus dealt with His own disciples when they denied Him. This was not the way Jesus dealt with anybody. It was not what Jesus said, or did, or lived and died about. Jesus is the Christ – not Paul! Paul did not match up, in this instance. No great wonder; we know how that feels. But it is imperative that we learn to see and know and feel the difference.

One of the people who learned most quickly that Paul was wrong was Paul himself. Of course, he did not know that he had written Holy Scripture or that he couldn't make any errors, so he was still capable of learning from his mistakes. He had a great advantage, that way, over many modern Christians, who assume that because he appears in the New Testament, he can only speak unerring truth.

Paul did teach the Corinthians a great deal. We only get a whiff of it from the letters that have been preserved. In those letters come some of the highest and most profound words the world has ever heard: *“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”* *“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”* *“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself”* *“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”* *“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels and have not love”*

How much do we *want* from one man? But it does not mean he can never be wrong. Isn't it sad, and doesn't it ring familiar bells, that this same man, in anger and frustration, could write the terrible fifth chapter? Everybody who goofs should be shunned – kicked out of the church and consigned to Satan. In the light of the Christ, that cannot be right. If that is right, I will quit today and you will never see me again, because I have been too wrong, too many times. Only mercy and grace can allow me to stay, and grant me any place among you. The Bible is holy, not because there are no errors in it, but because it shows the real drama of Christ at work in the real world, and in mortal flesh like Paul ... and like us.

So, fortunately, it was not just Paul teaching the Corinthians. The Corinthians also taught Paul. Perhaps he had taught them so well that they knew when to disregard him. That brings me hope. In any case, Paul himself was able to learn. The Corinthian Christians caused

him to take another step – to come back into the Gospel on a higher plane. I wish we had the letter of the Corinthians back to Paul. We can only imagine it:

“You taught us of God’s love – that we should always trust God’s mercy. You said God’s desire is for reconciliation, not for punishment. Is the task, then, to judge – or to redeem? Does the Cross not hold good for our erring brother? Has he committed the unforgivable sin? What happened to the lost sheep, and the thief on the cross, and the returning prodigal? And what of yourself? Did you not tell us that you yourself helped to murder Stephen and other Christians, and that our Lord still, amazingly, forgave you and offered you service in His Kingdom? Your last letter is not matching the truth of the purpose of the Lord Christ as you yourself taught us to love and follow Him.”

Apparently Paul had already had his own second thoughts, and maybe some tough sessions in prayer. He canceled the trip he had planned, and he put the whole affair back into the hands of the Corinthian church, to deal with as they saw fit. The upshot of it seems to be that they had a heart-to-heart talk with the erring member. But they did not consign him to Satan. They wanted him in the church, and knew that this was a time when he needed the church more than ever – needed to know and feel the reality of Christ’s love and mercy. Reading between the lines, one of their biggest concerns was that Paul might come storming back to Corinth at the worst possible moment and undo all their efforts to reconcile and to heal.

Whatever letters, prayers, and thoughts reached Paul between the two passages we have, Paul came back in another letter with a very different tone. It was a little vague, maybe even a bit sheepish. But you can tell that Paul was really pleased with the strength of faith his Corinthian friends had shown. He knew that this time they were right, and he was wrong.

From II Corinthians 1:23-2:11:

I appeal to God as my witness and stake my life upon it: it was out of consideration for you that I did not after all come to Corinth. It is not that we have control of your faith; rather we are working with you for your happiness. For it is by that faith that you stand. So I made up my mind that my next visit to you must not be another painful one. If I cause pain to you, who is left to cheer me up, except you whom I have

offended? This is precisely the point I made in my letter: I did not want, I said, to come and be made miserable by the very people who ought to have made me happy; and I had sufficient confidence in you all to know that for me to be happy is for all of you to be happy. That letter I sent you came out of great distress and anxiety; how many tears I shed as I wrote it! Not because I wanted to cause you pain; rather I wanted you to know the love, the more than ordinary love, that I have for you.

Any injury that has been done has not been done to me; to some extent (I do not want to make too much of it) it has been done to you all. The penalty on which the general meeting has agreed has met the offense well enough. Something very different is called for now: you must forgive the offender and put heart into him; the man's distress must not be made so severe as to overwhelm him. I urge you therefore to reassure him of your love for him. I wrote, I may say, to see how you stood the test, whether you fully accepted my authority. But anyone who has your forgiveness has mine too; and when I speak of forgiving (so far as there is anything for me to forgive), I mean that as the representative of Christ I have forgiven him for your sake. For Satan must not be allowed to get the better of us; we know his wiles all too well.

The last verse sums it up. Paul knew what had happened: He had lost a round with Satan. This time, the Corinthian Christians were faithful enough to bail him out before it had a chance to take serious effect. The thing nobody could foresee was that the letter would be saved and canonized, and that, over time, people would read the fifth chapter without realizing it was Paul at his worst, or that Paul himself had regretted it, grown from it, and gone on with his pilgrimage. So Satan got his Inquisition anyway. He did not have much chance of keeping Paul blind for very long, but with patience and care and a knack for cashing in on confusion and blind obedience, Satan has often done a pretty fair job of keeping the church judgmental and moralistic, despite everything that Jesus or Paul could say or do.

Well, fair is fair, and Satan works hard for what he gets. But we do not have to help keep the balance or feel sorry for him. We just get to be the church – a community of believers in a hard and broken world. Are you free to be yourself among us? Do you free others to be themselves? Are you accepted, gifts and hang-ups and all? Do you accept others who come here, gifts and hang-ups and all? Are you called to your highest, but in your own time and by God's love at work within

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you? Do you believe in the true destiny of others in the same light and by the same process? Even sometimes believing it for others when they cannot believe it for themselves?

If you should find among us some who do not accept you, free you, affirm you, believe in you – claim it from Jesus anyway. They do not understand yet. They are still at war with, or asleep to, the Gospel. So believe it from Christ and in His name. Or maybe, like me, you find yourself free and freeing others some days, then trying to take it back or ruin it on other days. Well, that is precisely why I preach this sermon. I need to realize and remember that Paul did not have all good days either – he did not do it right all the time. And the Lord did not fire him. So maybe that means we get to keep trying too. And that means we need each other – need the church – just like Paul did. We need to be part of a family of recovering sinners who work and pray and study together, and keep each other honest and tuned to the Gospel. How else will we ever learn and live the grace of God, and the liberty with which Christ has set us free?