

# Ash Wednesday – Epistle

## LIVING IN THE “ETERNAL NOW”

### 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10

#### Ash Wednesday

#### Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

5:20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 6:1 As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. 2 For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! 3 We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found in our ministry, 4 but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in affliction, hardships, calamities, 5 beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; 6 by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, 7 truthful speech, and the power of God; with weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; 8 in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; 9 as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; 10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Lost in the “Temporal Moment,” that is, on the Basis of “Outward Appearance”**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Living from a “Human Point of View” (Cf. 5:16)***

The section of 2 Corinthians from which this Ash Wednesday pericope comes begins with this plea from Paul: “Regard no one from a human point of view” (5:16). The Corinthians, though they had “accepted the grace of God” (6:1) in theory, nevertheless, they were not viewing things from that perspective in actuality. They were still viewing things from a “human point view,” especially, things that pertained to their salvation, like Christ and his ambassador, Paul. The tension between the messenger and its recipients, the pastor and the congregation or the person of the Christian witness and the person being witnessed to-that is the external problem. Doesn’t that same “human point of view,” and the tensions it raises, still persist in today’s church and world? And what is it about the “human point of view,” for Paul, that makes it an undependable-if not a “vain” or empty (6:1)-point of view? Answer: It is a point of view that “boasts in outward appearances and not in the heart” (5:12). Take, for example, Paul and his Corinthian critics. They were very impressive people from a “human point of view.” They were intellectually well educated, socially well positioned, politically well empowered, economically well off. Paul had none of this (cf. 4:7-12; 6:3-10). From a “human point of view” he was the opposite of “well off.” So how could Paul possibly have anything valuable to give them, they thought? And yet, he claims to be an “ambassador for Christ” (5:20). Far from looking like an ambassador of salvation, Paul looked like, well ... God damned “sin” (5:12)! Indeed, if what Paul has to give leads to what he is-wretched from a human point of view-then, they wanted nothing to do with it or him. And so they didn’t; they cast him off; they “dissed” him (as kids say today), and treated all that he possessed as unimportant.

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Boasting in Outward Appearances (5:12)***

The limitation of the “human point of view,” says Paul, is that it “boasts in outward appearances and not in the heart” (5:12). That word “boast” is very important in Paul’s vocabulary. For that in which we “boast” is that which we prize the most. That in which we boast is that in which we trust above all else. The concept of the “heart” also pervades Paul’s theological language in 2 Corinthians. The heart has to do with our true identity and nature-and the heart cannot be manipulated like outward appearances can. What the heart is it is. The human point of view is very “good” at judging outward appearances and its natural inclination is to boast in what it sees as outward success and whatever may enhance outward appearance? But why does it boast in outward things, things it can manipulate, and not in the heart? Answer, because there is nothing in the heart to boast about. For in the heart is sin and it desires to hide that truth by focusing on outward things.

## **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Lost in the Temporal Moment: Accepting the Grace of God in Vain (6:1)***

In 2 Corinthian Paul describes God as the One who “knows my heart” (1:23). The Corinthians, and all who boast in outward appearances, therefore, are in grave danger. For what the Corinthians think of Paul with regard to his outward appearances-“God damned sin,” God knows of them with regard to their hearts: God damned sin. Therefore, even though they may have earlier accepted the grace of God, in light of their present “boast in outward appearances” such earlier acceptance is “in vain.” Their hearts, emptied of (“vain” with regard to) grace, are filled with themselves, which is sin. Hence, their sins still “count” against them (5:19), they remain unreconciled to God (5:20), they are lost in the temporal moment.

## **Prognosis: Live in the “Eternal Now,” that is, on the Basis of “God’s Appeal” (5:20)**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** – *“For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin...” (5:21)*

The gospel’s solution begins by viewing things from a whole new perspective-or better, from the perspective of the “new creation” (5:17): that is, not from the view point of humanity, but from the point of view of Christ and his cross. Christ (and his saving deed on the cross) makes no “common sense” from a human point of view, that is, from the perspective of outward appearances. Nevertheless, when viewed from the perspective of God’s heart, Christ and his cross is the way God makes “saving sense” for senseless common sinners. “For our sake,” the sake of senseless common sinners, “God makes [Christ] to be sin who knew know sin, so that in him we [common sinners] might become the righteousness of God.” That is the gospel. Sin, in order to be destroyed, needed to be destroyed in the flesh-that is, along with the flesh, where it hides so cleverly by veiling itself in humanly appealing outward appearances. Sinners, in order to be reconciled to God (5:18-19), needed to be rid of their sin. But how to rid the sinner of sin and gain her back as righteous-that is the issue? How to change rotten, sinful flesh into fresh new creation? From a human point of view that’s impossible, but in Christ (in his death and resurrection) that is what God does! Christ is the One who establishes a new creation where “everything old” regardless of its outward appearances “passes away” so that everything (including-and especially!-God damned sinners) can “become new,” fresh creation (5:17). In principle, that humanly, unimaginable feat has been accomplished in Christ. Christ’s death and resurrection, therefore, is “the day of salvation” (6:2); he is the “eternal now,” the “acceptable time” where new life as reconciled life with God begins.

**Step 5: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Solution)** – *“Boasting in*

*the Heart" (5:12); "Accepting the Grace of God (6:1)*

Paul's ministry is nothing but an "appeal" from the crucified Christ himself, for whom he is an "ambassador," to the Corinthians, that they let Christ into their hearts, sinful, as they are. In that way Christ becomes their sin to give them his righteousness. There is no reason to be embarrassed by Christ's ugly, outward appearance as he takes on our sin, but there is every reason to boast of him in the heart (5:20) and he imparts his righteousness. Indeed, Paul credits his unseemly outward appearances as his attempt to put "no obstacle" in the way of this appeal. For it is not the outward appearance that counts before God, but Christ in the heart and the heart's boast in him. This boast is our reconciliation with God.

**Step 6: Final Diagnosis (External Solution)** – *Living in the "Eternal Now" (6:2) with "Hearts Opened Wide" (6:11-12)*

Paul's own present lifestyle, characterized as an "open heart" posture (6:11), though unimpressive perhaps from a human point of view is one that flows freely from having Christ in the heart. Note what ugly, outward hardships his open heart eagerly endures (6:3-10). But he is not ashamed in the least of that outward look. To the contrary, Paul is quite proud of it and "commends" the look "in every way" (6:4) as a kind of freedom, of obstacle-removing impediments for his Corinthian brothers and sisters. Indeed, so proud is Paul of Christ and the kind of life that he has engendered, that he gloats "we are your boast even as you are our boast" (1:14). For many Christians this kind of language sounds...well...too immodest, if not unchristian. But not for Paul. For Paul the opposite of "boasting in outward appearances" is not some kind of puritanical self-denial or glum posture of self-shame. No, the opposite of boasting in outward appearance is "boasting in the heart," in our own hearts, because of the Christ who lives and dwells and works in them. The Christian life is pure joy, especially, in its capacity to

pour out its heart in sacrificial love for others.