

**Kata Sarka**  
LaGrave Avenue CRC  
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2 Corinthians 5:11-17

“From now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view” That’s how verse 16 reads in your pew Bible. Some of you probably remember the older versions of the text – the King James Version for instance – it said we no longer look at people “according to the flesh.” Instead of “worldly point of view,” you had, ‘according to the flesh.’ ‘According to the flesh’ is actually a more literal translation of the Greek. The Greek is *kata sarka*: *kata*, according to, *sarka*, the flesh. “From now on we regard no one according to the flesh.” What does this phrase mean?

What is Paul talking about when he tells us that when we are in Christ, we no longer look at each other *kata sarka*, according to the flesh? At first, it sounds like looking at someone according to their physical body, but that’s not quite right. When Paul talks about flesh – *sarka* – he’s not talking about a quality of your physical body, he is talking about a quality of your Spirit. To live according to the flesh is to have a certain attitude in your spirit.

What attitude is that? When I think of looking at something *kata sarka*, according to the flesh, I think of the way I approached Sunday worship in my first year at Calvin. When I first came to Calvin there were still student worship services held every Sunday morning at 11AM in the FAC. I attended these for most of my first year there. There were lots of good things about these services: they were close to my dorm room, they had a nice late starting time and the preaching was excellent. But the thing I remember most about these services was the amount of work everyone seemed to put into looking good for church. Everyone seemed really concerned with their appearance, because everyone knew that people were checking each other out. People were there to worship, but they were also there to look and be looked at.

I admit, to my shame, that I was no different. I was right in there with everyone else trying to look good. This was the eighties and so I started to pay attention to the fashion rules so that I could make a statement. For example: I noticed that people seemed to be wearing bold paisley shirts. So I got myself a bold paisley shirt. I noticed that everyone seemed to be wearing loafers, so I went out and bought a pair of loafers. I noticed that for some reason, everyone seemed to put a penny in the little leather slot on the top of the loafers, so I put a penny in my loafers. And stranger still, I noticed that people wore these loafers without socks. Men wearing dress shoes without socks! I never thought of doing anything like this. My mother would never have allowed it! But I was on my own now and it was clearly part of the uniform, so one Sunday I took deep breath, left my socks in the drawer, put on my loafers, and went to church.

What does this have to do with looking at people *kata sarka*, according to the flesh? It’s not the clothes so much. There is obviously no sin in wearing paisley, and if you insist on wearing dress shoes without socks go right ahead. Looking nice is fine. Beauty is good and godly. What was *kata sarka* about those situations was my attitude, and what seemed to be the attitude of my fellow students. What was *kata sarka* was this mindset where we were always trying to be impressive. What was *kata sarka* was our constant display of human strength in an attempt to win human approval and thereby gaining status. *Kata sarka* is a constant display of human strength in an attempt to win human approval, thereby gaining status. That’s living according to the flesh. That’s looking at each other from a worldly point of view.

This goes beyond physical appearance of course. I used an example which talked about judging people kata sarka in the realm of appearance, but there are all sorts of other ways to judge from a human point of view. In my college days we did it in the intellectual realm too. You'd get in class and you'd be talking about a poem and people would be trying to impress the teacher, impress each other with the depth of insight and the breadth of their knowledge. "Professor, isn't this like what Kierkegaard writes about in *Sickness Unto Death*? Didn't Eliot address this in the *Wasteland*?" We'd drop a name or two, more for effect than for genuine interest in either Kierkegaard or Eliot. That's kata sarka in the intellectual realm. Kata sarka showed up in the gym in the realm of athletics. Kata sarka showed up in the dorms in the subtle jockeying for social status. Sometimes the attitude was strong, sometimes it was weak, but it was always there. There was no time when the 'according to the flesh' attitude wasn't lingering in the air like a bad smell.

When I was college age and in the middle of those kata sarka times, I remember thinking that when I was older things would change. I thought, 'that's how people act and think when they're young, but when I'm older it will all be different! I won't be so obsessed with measuring up.' I wish that were so. I'm almost 55 now, and kata sarka is still very much alive in the places I go. The standards are a little different, but they're there. I strongly suspect, in fact I know, that people at Sunset and Raybrook and Beacon Hill are still doing the kata sarka. It doesn't stop and it's exhausting.

Paul knows all about kata sarka, because the church in Corinth was judging him kata sarka. Paul spends much of his second letter to the Corinthians (and a good deal of his first letter to the Corinthians) defending his ministry and his authority. People in the community were sizing up Paul according to the flesh and they had found him wanting. They acknowledged that he wrote well, "His letters are weighty and strong!" Paul quotes them as saying this in chapter 10: "But, his bodily presence is weak and his speech is contemptible." Ouch. There's actually a second century document called the Acts of Paul that backs up this assessment of Paul. It describes Paul as "a man small in size, bald headed, bandy-legged, with eyebrows meeting and a rather hook-nosed." 'Paul? Please! He's bald-headed, bandy-legged and he can't preach a lick!' Paul had fallen out of fashion among the people. Now there were new preachers and teachers in town who looked much better: taller men with a full head of hair. These were men who could actually draw a crowd with their charisma and their rhetorical skill. When it came to being impressive, these men were the captain of the football team and Paul was the alternate secretary of the chess club.

How does Paul react to these judgments? Most of the time when we run into a situation where people are judging us kata sarka, our first reaction is to try to live up to their standards. If people are judging by appearance, we try to be as attractive as possible. If they're playing kata sarka in the intellectual realm, we try to be as clever as possible. If the game is looking at people kata sarka, we want to win.

Paul chooses a different way. Paul simply refuses to play the kata sarka game. Paul says "I'm not doing that. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Even though we once knew Christ kata sarka, we do so no longer." I used to play that game" said Paul. "That game used to consume me. I was a champion at that game If anyone thinks they have reason to put confidence in the sarx, I have more!" he says in *Philippians 3:4*. "I judged everyone by how impressive they were, how smart they were, how well they kept the law, how many times they attended synagogue, how strict they were on the Sabbath. I used to judge Jesus by that

standard and he was a loser, a heretic and a criminal as far as I was concerned. But I no longer look at Christ that way and I don't play kata sarka anymore."

Paul doesn't just dismiss the kata sarka attitude, he offers a new way of looking and living. Instead of regarding people kata sarka, you could regard them kata resurrection. Instead of living according to the flesh, you could live according to the resurrection. "From now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view, because if anyone is in Christ that person is a new creation." Throughout this section of 2 Corinthians Paul is comparing and contrasting two parts of every human being who is in Christ. In all of us there are two parts. On the one hand you have the worldly part, the kata sarka part. This is not our physical flesh; it's the part of us that is always trying to be impressive by human standards. That part is wasting away (4:16), that part is like a clay jar (4:7), that part is like an old tent (5:4). On the other hand, you have the new self, the person you are becoming in Christ. That part of you is being renewed day by day (4:16), that part of you is being changed from one degree of glory to the next (3:18) that part is a heavenly dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (5:2), that part is a new creation which is slowly, but surely, coming to light in you.

Paul's vision, his hope throughout these chapters and especially in the verses we read, is that instead of walking around kata sarka, judging people by how impressive they are, we could walk around and see each other according to that new self that is coming to life in Christ! The person who hurt you that one time, not as a hateful person, but a person intensely loved by Jesus and a new creation. The person who has those political opinions so different from yours, not as a crazy person, but a person intensely loved by Jesus and a new creation. The down syndrome person, a new creation. The person in your family who's let you down so many times, a new creation. The person who looks back at you in the mirror in the morning who has let you down so many times, a new creation.

I doubt that I will ever really be able to say that I regard no one according to the flesh. Unfortunately, I think there will always be a bit of kata sarka in me. But I am learning to try to see others, to try to see the whole world kata resurrection, and sometimes it happens. I think it happened for me a little in the last months of the life of Pope John Paul. During the last year or so of his life, people wrote a lot about John Paul's health and some people wondered, "Why doesn't he just retire! He's old and his Parkinson's is advanced! Why doesn't he step down and let someone more competent step in! What's the matter with these people!!" But the Catholic Church was resolute. They said, "No, the world has a certain way of measuring strength, but by having a broken, and physically weak man at its head, the church is showing the world that a person has value and glory beyond her human strength." The critics looked at the pope kata sarka, but the Catholic church wanted to encourage everyone to take another look.

To me there was one image of the pope in his last months, where that became most clear. One of his last audiences was with some children. John Paul was up in the window with 2 young people, a boy and a girl, who looked like they were maybe 9 years old and they were letting a white dove go out into St. Peter's square. It was meant to be a symbol of peace. It was meant to fly elegantly off into the Roman morning. But this dove wasn't cooperating very well. It didn't neatly fly away off into the city, it kept coming back to the pope and the children. They would try to shoo it away and it would come back and land on the window still, flapping messily. It was actually quite funny

So this was the scene: The children and the old dying pope were laughing. The air was filled with bright wings. And all the while John Paul was joyfully making the sign of the cross over the birds, over the children, over the square, over the whole creation. In the perfect simplicity and

joy of that moment I found it impossible to look at any of this from an earthly point of view. In that moment it was so clear that there is something beyond the flesh, something beyond human strength. In that moment it seemed absolutely clear that if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation, the old has gone. The new is come.

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