"From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer." The words, "from a human point of view," do not actually occur in the Greek text. The translators of the RSV have rendered the phrase *katá sárka*, "according to the flesh," somewhat freely in order to avoid a possible misunderstanding. Paul's words, "to regard Christ no longer according to the flesh," could be interpreted to mean that Paul had lost interest in the historical Jesus, i.e., "Christ according to the flesh," and was only interested in the glorified and exalted Lord. That is not, the translators concluded, what Paul meant, and so they translated the words, "according to the flesh," by the phrase, "from a human point of view."

On the other hand, the phrase, "from a human point of view," is itself problematic as a translation of *katá sárka*. How exactly does a human being escape making judgments, whether about Christ or about another human being, from a human point of view? Even if we grant, as I am fully prepared to do, that the gospel liberates us to make judgments by standards that are not merely human in origin, we make them nevertheless as human beings and therefore inescapably "from a human point of view."

Clearly, something more is involved in "according to the flesh" than can be captured by the words "from a human point of view."

The phrase, "to regard according to the flesh," has, it seems to me, at least four levels of meaning of which the first, "to regard from a human point of view," may be the least treacherous. After all, to confess that one is human and can only regard things from a human point of view is to plead the oldest mitigating circumstance on the books. It is to throw oneself on the mercy of the court by appealing to the universally acknowledged finitude, inconstancy, provinciality, and weakness of the human species. *Homines sumus*, we are only human, can be written as the final line of every human life, and not just
scribbled in the margin of biographies of politicians and TV evangelists.

To judge from a human point of view is therefore to judge from a point of view that is limited, inconsistent, often lacking in pertinent facts, sometimes lacking in charity and patience. Even those who know us best and love us most find it difficult at times to understand our moods or attitudes and impute to us motives and intentions that we do not have and could never harbor. To judge another person from a human point of view is to render a summary evaluation of another human life on the basis of partial, and partially misperceived, information. The new creation in Christ, when it comes, puts an end to the judgment of others "from a human point of view." But more is involved in the phrase, "according to the flesh," than just this.

A second level of meaning has been suggested by the translation in the Anchor Bible. Victor Paul Furnish proposes that katà sárka be translated "according to worldly standards." The shift in this translation is from the perspective of the individual to the perspective of the group or groups to which the individual belongs. To talk about judgment by worldly standards is, of course, to suggest judgment by wicked standards, though the picture may be more complex than that. To judge by worldly standards may mean to judge by commonly-held standards that are inappropriate, even if morally unobjectionable.

Unlike the Anabaptists, Martin Luther was particularly reluctant to describe too closely a pattern for authentic Christian discipleship. For Luther, a Christian is one who trusts the promises of God offered in the Gospel, who stakes life itself on the reliability of that Word. While faith, of course, expresses itself in works of love, the works of love that faith does conform to no single prescribed pattern. Since authentic Christians come in all shapes and sizes, not all of which are equally agreeable, Luther will not endorse an approved list of good works. Touch not, taste not, handle not, belong to Law, not to the Gospel. To judge by such standards, to demand conformity to the latest approved list of good works, even if endorsed by almost all my peers and teachers, is to regard another Christian brother or sister by worldly standards. The new creation in Christ, when it comes, puts an end to the judgment of others "according to worldly standards." But more is involved in the phrase, "according to the flesh,"
Luther suggests a third level of meaning in Paul's phrase when he contrasts reality and appearance. The contrast between reality and appearance for Luther is not Plato's contrast between history (the realm of mere appearance) and eternity (the realm of ideas), but between what God is actually doing in history and how what God is doing appears to us. Luther is convinced that a central theme in St. Paul is the notion that the work of God is hidden under a contrary appearance—or, to use the language of Paul himself, that the wisdom of God is disclosed in what the world regards as folly. If we judge God's self-revelation by our reason and common sense, we will misunderstand it. To understand what God is doing, we have to close our eyes to what appears to be shiningly, even embarrassingly, obvious and open our ears to the Word that unlocks the otherwise hidden meaning of the event.

Luther demonstrates what it would mean to regard Christ "according to appearance" in a famous 1533 sermon on Christ's entry into Jerusalem. The prophet Zachariah, who is cited as the interpreter of this event, characterizes Christ's lowly entry into Jerusalem on a donkey as the entry of a king into his capital. But there is nothing kinglike about Christ, the poor beggar-king, who enters the city, riding a borrowed animal, without saddle and spurs, greeted only by old men and children. Judged by human reason, "Christ according to appearance," is a messianic pretender, one more in pathetically long line of self-deluded rabbis.

To understand what is really happening, we have to close our eyes to what we can see and open our ears to the Word of the prophet, who alone discloses the hidden meaning of what is unfolding before us, the mystery sub contrario absconditum. If we judge by appearance, by the empirical data filtered through our prudential reason and common sense, we will get it all hopelessly wrong. The new creation in Christ, when it comes, puts an end to the judgment of others "according to appearance." But more is involved in the phrase, "according to the flesh," than just this.

Flesh is often used by Paul to indicate human life that is turned in on itself. The flesh is the self-regarding self, the self that views and values all others from the perspective of its own self-interest. As
the Hollywood actress observed: "Well, that's enough about me. Let's talk about you. What do you think about me?" To regard others, "according to the flesh," is to regard them as a danger to or an enhancement of our self-esteem.

In his novel, *Kill and Tell*, William X. Kienzle, mystery writer and former Catholic priest, stages a conversation between the villain, auto executive Frank Hoffman, and a morally ambiguous character, Michael Ratigan, auxiliary Roman Catholic bishop of Detroit. Hoffman argues in his conversation with the distressed bishop that there is no real difference between corporate success as a company man and a successful career in the Church.

"Think about it sometime, Mike. We are upwardly mobile. We have high pot, as they say in my industry. And you didn't become a bishop by choosing the lowest place at the table as in the Gospel story."

"Now, wait a minute--"

"I know what you are going to say. And I know there are people who actually make the Gospels work for them. There's Mother Theresa of Calcutta and there's Dom Helder Camera of Recife. There are exceptions in my field too. Every once in a long while you may run across a genuinely nice guy who's made it. But we both know that's the exception not the rule.

"Mostly, it's guys like you and me. We know which strings have to be pulled, which backs need to be scratched, which side the butter's on, who to get papal audiences for...." Hoffman glanced at Ratigan, who seemed to wince slightly.

"We know where the power is. We know the path to power and we take it. I don't know where the skeletons are in your closet--I don't want to know--but I know where the bodies are buried in my past, and I don't regret one of them. I'd guess neither do you regret yours. If I hadn't pulled the rug out from under some of the people who stood in my way, I'd still be on the bottom looking up."

"But...but...deliberately undermining somebody else's career...why, that's immoral. It's a sin!" Ratigan felt as if he should be hearing Hoffman's confession rather than listening to an *apologia pro vita*. 
“Sin! How could the only sure road to success be a sin! The Beatitudes may work in a monastery or a convent. But they don't work at The Company. They don't even work that well among the people who preach them.

"Must I say I can't agree with you Frank. No, not at all!"

"Your problem, Mike, is that you haven't thought about it enough. I know..."

Ratigan seemed about to speak again, but Hoffman's raised hand cut him off.

"I know," Hoffman continued, "because you've done it before, that you're about to quote St. Paul about how if a man desires the office of a bishop, he desires a good work.

"Well, I never heard Frank Martin say it in so many words, but I can assure you he has similar thoughts to those of St. Paul. 'Any employee of The Company,' Frank might say, 'who desires a management position--and the higher in management the better--desires a good thing.'

"God bless us, we in management know damn well that we've got a good thing. We'd be stupid to get where we are if we didn't know that we're billions of times better off than the suckers on the line. Any the higher we go, the better off we are. So, now, let me paraphrase St. Paul: 'We who desire to be chairman of the board of The Company desire the best damn thing available.'"

Generally, self-regard is not as crass and openly acquisitive as the self-regard of the fictional Frank Hoffman. Reinhold Niebuhr, who brought the concept of original sin back into the public discourse of American Protestantism, was content to define it as thinking of oneself more highly than one ought to think. But crass or subtle, the principle is the same. To regard other human beings "according to the flesh," is not only to regard them "from a human point of view," to judge them "according to worldly standards" or "appearances." It is to value them from the perspective of one's own self-interest. The new creation in Christ, when it comes, puts an end to the selfish judgment of others as it puts an end to every other judgment katà sárka.

One final note: if we read what Paul has said as a series of moral injunctions--don't judge
others from your parochial perspective or the equally parochial perspectives of the groups to which you belong, don't be misled by appearances or seduced by self-regard--we misunderstand him at the vital point. Paul is announcing a change of attitude that has come about as a result of what God has done, a change so fundamental, so revolutionary, that it can only be called God's new creation. He is not outlining a set of duties for us to discharge. The text is about Gospel not Law, grace not works, gift not human achievement.

"If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God....From now on, therefore, we regard no one 'according to the flesh.'"