

Who is your mom? I mean, who is she to you? Is she a good motherly figure? Or did she fall short on the job (as we are all going to do)? Was she your friend? Protector? Provider? Source of all wisdom and comfort? Depending on how you see her—on how the relationship has formed over the years and on the expectations for “mom” that society has built up for you—depending on these factors, how you interact with her will change. The same is true for any relationship. Our perceptions prepare our expectations.

So who is Christ to you? How do you regard Him?

Is He a perfect example? The standard of how to live your life? The picture of God’s perfect love for us? A good friend to help out on tough days, to listen to you and maybe give a hand? Is He the guy who keeps the party going by supplying the wine and snacks? Is He a good listener who isn’t going to jump on the judging band-wagon? Is He the one who has all knowledge so sticking with Him is good because at least tomorrow won’t be a surprise to one of you?

Is He sin embodied, becoming on the cross everything evil, that you have done and that has been done to you, hung there to die that sin and death would no longer have *any* power?

If this last one is our answer (not that the others are wrong, but they are not complete) but if this is our answer, then we understand Paul in His lesson today—we regard Christ in a new way, and it changes everything about how we regard Him, as well as *everyone* outside of our little self.

You see, if we live and relate to each other based off our experience of humanity, we will expect some people to be lovely, some to be tolerable, and others to be a pain in our neck. Those who have been there for us, who’ve been a positive influence on our little world, we will view them in such a light and expect the same to come from them and in turn we treat them with dignity. Those whom we’d rather avoid in the streets receive less affectionate care from us—in our mindsets and in action too.

This transactional way of viewing people and interacting with them is to regard them humanly. It comes all too naturally to each of us who have received the lovely gift of original sin from our first

parents, a gift that seems to keep on giving. And even in the Church, among the redeemed, it remains our natural instinct to hang around with and care for those who at least won't tear us down.

But Paul tells us not to regard anyone in such a way, though we are not given an easy checklist to do this. Instead, in today's Gospel lesson, we see such compassion lived out for us. Let's take a look.

Early on in the parable, the younger son shows his cards and demonstrates his character. He's a brat with selfish motives and an indulgent personality. His ego and appetite are number one in his life, and in order to entertain himself, he wishes his father dead. He doesn't ask for a loan; he's not looking for a little allowance or spending money for a quick vacation. He severs his tie to the family, asking for that which would be rightfully his—only after the time of death is announced for his old man.

No father in his right mind would dispense of such a gift. He had every right to discipline him, to tell him to get back to work, or even to cut him out of the family. But this is not a father in his right mind, apparently. He gives it all away and watches his son skip off into the distance to partake in who knows what.

But his abnormal lavish care doesn't end here. He mourns the loss of this son who has slapped him in the face, while the older, faithful son, carries on at home, happy the son has gotten what he deserves, and even happier that he has gotten out. Such an ingrate doesn't bring any help to the family.

Yet the father mourns, and the father waits. Some have put forth the idea that each day he would look on the horizon, hoping for the son's silhouette to appear at the end of the road. And then, on the day when he pops into view he doesn't wait for the son to come grovelling. We learn that he doesn't expect tears, he doesn't even need to see remorse. The son is back—that is enough. And he is restored immediately by the father into the family, with full inheritance and authority. The son who was dead is alive again, He was lost but now is found.

Now you know this doesn't make the older brother happy. He's viewing this situation from a human perspective, and therefore the backstabbing man, "your son" he says to his father, rather than

“my brother,” Your son should remain dead to the family. He didn’t want to be here so he shouldn’t be allowed to. Yet as he says this, he is just as far away from the heart of the family, from the heart of the father as the younger son was in the distant place.

That the older son doesn’t rejoice alongside the father, as he had a duty to do, is a slap in the face of the father and the family too. The father should’ve grabbed him by the ear to drag him home and said you’ve got 5 minutes to prepare a toast, and I better believe every joyful word that comes from your mouth—and put on a nice tie. But rather than reprimanding him, the father simply reminds him of the joy, of the feast, of the paradise which has always been his, not because he earned it or was faithful, but because he is the father’s son too. He could take time to rejoice each and every day. And on this day, we doubly rejoice, because we are here among the father and because one who was lost, who was dead, has returned to life. So rejoice!

So how did the father regard his sons? Humanly and transactionally? No, it was from a divine perspective, with the reconciliation which Paul speaks of in the fore of his mind. He doesn’t expect them to get it right before the party is thrown—they don’t need to be right in order to come home or to join the party—He is just happy that they would partake in his gifts, which are already fully prepared. Certainly both had to repent in order to get to the party—they had to turn from their selfish, distant ways, but that is not what earned or even unlocked the father’s favour. It’s not even what reconciled or united their ungrateful hearts to the father’s love—he had already done that freely by giving all he had to them. But in turning, they simply receive everything he is already pouring out.

This is how God now views us in Christ Jesus. Each of us have gone astray like the prodigal son, wayward in this sin or that. Each have indulged and been focused on our selves with our wants. Each have wanted God our Father dead that we may simply be left to our own vices in peace. This is how we were born, before the great news of salvation was proclaimed to us, and to this same distant place is where many of us have returned, whether for a day trip or an extended visit.

And we're also prone to standing in the older brother's shoes, looking at others who have strayed farther, thought stranger, and lived wilder; we stand there and scoff and ask where on earth is our pat on the back for being so dang faithful.

Yet though we stray into one camp or the other, even after we've been baptised, forgiven, changed, even though we continue to stray, the Father does not view us as such vagrant wanderers—He doesn't tsk His tongue and expect a change of heart, but instead He sees us in Christ. Because Christ died for all, while all were sinners, He died for us too. Therefore the price has been paid, the whole of humanity reconciled to the Father, through Him, and all may live in Him, especially you.

If we view Christ like this, we know exactly what we have already been made into and we know exactly who He continues to be for us as we journey through this life. He died in our place, He became our sin. And rising from the dead we live, even now, in His eternal life and righteousness, a new creation already, not because of anything we did, not even because we changed our ways, not *even* because we repented. We are a new creation because He died and rose in our place.

And the same is true of our neighbours. Of those who are Lutherans, Catholics, Pentecostals, and Baptists alike. Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormons, Muslims, and Hindus, and Atheists. Virgins and whores, athletes and quadriplegics. Thieves, blasphemers, and gossips. Drunks and teetotalers, gay and straight, embryos, babies, teenagers, young adults, seniors and anyone in between. He has died for all and thus has already reconciled *all* back to God, the God whom we had turned away from to chase after our own sinful desires—thanks Adam and Eve. But do not fear. Your sin has already been dealt with.

So, our neighbours' sin too is dealt with, but to regard them humanly is to watch how they measure up. Do their deeds stand out, what can they do for me, can they fit into my little world? To regard them humanly is to forget that their sins are already dealt with. To regard them as we regard Christ, as Christ regards us, is to see them as one whom Christ loves and died for, as one who is already forgiven, their sins already washed away. It's like they have the package of salvation in the post office,

but in order to know that it's sitting there, waiting for them, already complete and ready to enjoy, they need the sticker on the front door or in their po box saying go check it out.

We proclaim Christ crucified for them, everything completed on their behalf, so that through the Word, the Holy Spirit would work faith and bring them into Christ, into a place of receiving Him. This is baptismal language, to be put into Christ, whether 1 hour old or 99 years. Here you are in Christ and you receive everything that He has finished for you and you become a new creation.

Certainly in our proclamation of His finished work we don't approve of everything that everyone does. I certainly don't approve of every aspect of my own life. But that which I disagree with in another's life doesn't mean that I have not been equipped and sent with the news of their salvation. And even that which is against God's Law in their life does not keep them barred from receiving every gift He loves to give; it doesn't even give us the authority to "wait until they understand and change." We haven't been sent to fix, correct, or even redirect. Our sending to the world is to echo Paul's words: Be reconciled to God! Receive everything He has already prepared for you, receive it by believing that Christ died in your place.

Easy, right? Yes and no. As new creations, as the righteousness of God, it's not difficult at all. Because He does it through us, it's so easy that we don't even know it's happening.

Yet because we remain sinful, because our human perspective holds fast until this body dies and awaits its perfect resurrection, because we remain double hearted and we doubt the reality and the truth of this message we believe and proclaim. It can't be that easy.

Or we hesitate and resist because we've fallen back into the camp of the older brother and don't want it to be that easy, that free, for those who are clearly so far away. We don't want their mess in our camp because they don't deserve to be here. And you're right—they don't. But neither do we.

Or we forget to proclaim the message because we've strayed into the camp of the younger brother, out for a detour. And while we are reconciled to God we are also not really receiving it at the

moment. At this point hardship, either from the consequences of our actions or from the harsh blow of God's Law, needs to drive us home to the open paradise of the Father's arms.

This is what He does for us no matter where we've strayed. He constantly calls us, chases us, catches us, and carries us, reminding us that we have been reconciled, that we have been made into a new creation. We might be awaiting that reality to be made sight, but it is in fact our reality here and now.

This and only this is what will send us out to remind those in the family of His love and tell anew those who need to be welcomed in. Not a good evangelism plan. Not a charismatic personality. Not a perfect demographic census which can tell us exactly what the people need. Not even thousands of hours of praying. They might help, but only hearing that Christ has already reconciled you to God and has indeed already made you a new creation will give you the strength to live confidently in His grace, sure of your life and salvation and forgiveness.

And sure enough, brothers and sisters in Christ, the old has passed away, and the new has come. Christ Jesus became your sin that you would become the righteousness of God. You live in Christ. Today His child who was dead is alive, the child who was lost is found. Welcome home.

You are His beloved new creation. Today until the rest of eternity.

Amen.