### 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 New International Version (NIV)

**16**So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. **17**Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! **18**All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: **19**that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.**20**We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. **21**God made him who had no sin to be sin**[**[**b**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2Corinthians+5:16-21#fen-NIV-28899b)**]** for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

### Luke 15:1-32 New International Version (NIV)

**15**Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. **2**But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

**3**Then Jesus told them this parable:

**11**Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. **12**The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

**13**“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. **14**After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. **15**So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. **16**He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

**17**“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! **18**I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. **19**I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ **20**So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

**21**“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

**22**“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. **23**Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.**24**For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

**25**“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. **26**So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. **27**‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

**28**“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.**29**But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. **30**But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

**31**“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. **32**But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

“Oh Brother!”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

There but for the Grace of God, go I. That might have been the older brother’s response when his profligate brother returned home. But it’s not. He is incredibly resentful, not to mention rather arrogant and rude to his father. Still, it’s understandable, isn’t it? He has been “slaving,” as he calls it, and obedient. His brother who has done everything against what his father would want for him returns from having done so, and is greeted like, well, a long-lost son. There but for the Grace of God go I. That might have been the older brother’s response.

Scratch the surface of almost any family, and you will find a little anger. Scratch the surface of almost any family, and you will find a little resentment, and pretty frequently about what is perceived as an unequal sharing of parents’ wealth. Yes, I think many of us can understand the older brother’s position. If not within our own families, it may be that this sense of inequitable use of resources makes itself known in our workplaces. We might question why another person seems to receive different treatment than we do, even though we have been working as hard as we can and have done all that is expected of us—and maybe even more. Sure, in a business situation it might be harder to say that the father figure of this parable is acting out of love, but what is certain is that we don’ t always know what operates in other people. We don’t always know the entire back story of any situation, including what we might call rules of employment. Oh, brother, some things seem so unfair. Still, as we hear in today’s lesson from Corinthians, Christ has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We have a job to do, and our model for how to do it well does not come from the Older Brother.

You might think that I want for us to emulate the role of the Father in this story, and while it is true that a model of forgiveness and of selfless love is one that ought to urge us to love more widely and well ourselves, this is a high expectation. We hear this story and know that we are to be grateful that the Father figure in response to the young man known as the prodigal son reminds us of God’s grace. The Father loves, forgives his son, and celebrates his return, even in the face of his older son’s understandable resentment. No, like the older brother might have thought, we can look upon the younger son, who has disappointed his father who loves him, and say, “There but for the Grace of God go I.”

This young man did not leave his father’s house intending to end up envying the life of the pigs whose slop he shoveled. If he had already been someone with a proven record of wastefulness and what I am sure we can call unrighteous living, I really doubt his father would have sent him off with his blessing. No, I am guessing there is more to this story than meets the eye. Maybe some of you have seen this story play out in your own lives or in the lives of people you know, and maybe even love. Despite their most sincere efforts, their plans for success never add up to much. Having been told when they were young that they weren’t strong enough, or good looking enough, or smart enough to succeed, they seek increasing failure because it’s what they expect of themselves. Or maybe they have every human gift imaginable, but also happen to be alcoholic, or addicted in some other way to substances that keep them from achieving their best. Try as they might to be obedient to the expectations of the people who love them, the strength of the disease beats them back from comfort and success. Or maybe they have achieved professional success but have become distanced from the people who love them, because in their addiction they don’t ever feel worthy of that love.

And sometimes, it is not as dramatic as this, but we know somehow that we have fallen short of the mark of excellence we have learned God expects of us. How in the world can we ever live up to the notion of perfection that some have set for us? But thank God, our Lord does not expect of us perfection. God loved us so much that he sent Jesus, through whom we are reconciled to God. There is, however, a character in this story we are meant to emulate. In one moment of stark realization, the younger brother knows what he is to do. Not only does he desire to have the comforts of his original home. He wants the forgiveness of his father. **21**“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” Be careful, though, while God does want us to repent of our wrongdoing, with Jesus calling for us to do just that, the interaction between the father and son does not begin with his apology. Even before he opens his mouth, the Father has embraced him. I would call this prevenient grace; we receive God’s gracious love, independent of any decision we make. God is loving *us*, even while we are shunning *God*. This young man’s father was loving him, even when he was compelled to riotous living away from home.

Still, it is the young man’s role in the story to turn back home. And it is our job to turn toward God*.*  We spend our lives turning and also returning to God. We know that we sin; that we miss the mark, falling short of who God would have us be at our best. For some of us, it takes hitting bottom before we begin to know that there is an up to go to. Still, as we are turning and returning to God, God’s love is, in Shakespeare’s words, “an ever fixéd mark.” At no time does God ever look away from us or stop loving us. We can imagine the rapt face of a new mother, holding a precious newborn child. God continues to love us, lifelong, with that fixed gaze of adoration. But we need our reminders to turn back ourselves.

And we need to remember the example of the Older Son, set before us to remind us that God loves him, too. God loves us through our anger and our resentment, but also calls us to more gracious loving toward others. When we see anyone whose circumstances might make us question the intentions of their lives, we need to remember that God loves them—without question, and without the kind of judgments that we render—and we are called to love them, too. We are, after all, Christ’s ambassadors, called to love as God loves us. So, without resentment, and with open arms, we are to love the sinner as well as the saint. We are to love each other and strive toward reconciliation with one another and with God. We are to turn and return to God and to each other, by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that we might be made whole. May it be so for us.