

Parable of the Prodigal Son

The **Parable of the Prodigal Son** (also known as the parable of the **Two Brothers**, **Lost Son**, **Loving Father**, or of the **Forgiving Father**)^{[1][2]} is one of the parables of Jesus in the Bible, appearing in Luke 15:11–32.^[i] Jesus shares the parable with his disciples, the Pharisees and others.

In the story, a father has two sons. The younger son asks for his portion of inheritance from his father, who grants his son's request. This son, however, is *prodigal* (i.e., wasteful and extravagant), thus squandering his fortune and eventually becoming destitute. As consequence, he now must return home empty-handed and intend to beg his father to accept him back as a servant. To the son's surprise, he is not scorned by his father but is welcomed back with celebration and a welcoming party. Envious, the older son refuses to participate in the festivities. The father tells the older son: "you are ever with me, and all that I have is yours, but thy younger brother was lost and now he is found."

The Prodigal Son is the third and final parable of a cycle on redemption, following the parable of the Lost Sheep and the parable of the Lost Coin. In Revised Common Lectionary and Roman Rite Catholic Lectionary, this parable is read on the fourth Sunday of Lent (in Year C);^[3] in the latter it is also included in the long form of the Gospel on the 24th Sunday of Ordinary Time in Year C, along with the preceding two parables of the cycle.^[4] In the Eastern Orthodox Church it is read on the Sunday of the Prodigal Son.



The Return of the Prodigal Son
(1773) by Pompeo Batoni

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Narrative



James Tissot – *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Le retour de l'enfant prodigue) – [Brooklyn Museum](#)

The parable begins with a man who had two sons, and the younger of them asks his father to give him his share of the estate. The implication is the son could not wait for his father's death for his inheritance, he wanted it immediately. The father agrees and divides his estate between both sons.

Upon receiving his portion of the inheritance, the younger son travels to a distant country, where he indulges in extravagant living. It's implied that he drinks, gambles, and sleeps with prostitutes, during this time. However, it isn't long before he has exhausted all his money, and immediately thereafter, a famine strikes the land; leaving him desperately poor. He is forced to take work as a swineherd (which would have been abhorrent to Jesus' Jewish audience, who considered swine unclean animals) where he reaches the point of envying the food of the pigs he is tending to. At this time, he finally comes to his senses:^[ii]

And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

— Luke 15:17–20, KJV

This implies the father was hopefully watching for the son's return.

The son starts his rehearsed speech, admitting his sins, and declaring himself unworthy of being his father's son, but in most versions of Luke, the son does not even finish, before his father accepts him back wholeheartedly without hesitation^[5] as the father calls for his servants to dress the son in the finest robe available, get a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet, and to slaughter the "fatted calf" for a celebratory meal.

The older son, who was at work in the fields, hears the sound of celebration, and is told by a fellow servant about the return of his younger brother. He is not impressed, and becomes angry. He also has a speech for his father:^[iii]

And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: but as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.

— Luke 15:29–30, KJV

The parable concludes with the father explaining that while the older son has always been present, and everything the father owns also belongs to the older son, because the younger son had returned, in a sense, from the dead, celebration was necessary:^[iv]

It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

— Luke 15:32, KJV

Context and interpretation



The Prodigal Son, a 1618 painting by Rubens of the son as a swineherd

The opening, "A man had two sons" is a storyteller's trope and would immediately bring to mind Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, and Jacob and Esau. Jesus then confounds the listeners' expectations when the younger son is shown to be foolish.^[6]



Engraving of the Prodigal Son as a swineherd by Hans Sebald Beham, 1538

While a number of commentators see the request of the younger son for his share of the inheritance as "brash, even insolent"^[7] and "tantamount to wishing that the father was dead,"^[7] Jewish legal scholar Bernard Jackson says "Jewish sources give no support to [the idea] that the prodigal, in seeking the advance, wishes his father dead."^[6]

The young man's actions do not lead to success; he squanders his inheritance and he eventually becomes an indentured servant, with the degrading job of looking after pigs, and even envying them for the carob pods they eat.^[7] This recalls Proverbs 29:3: "Whoever loves wisdom gives joy to his father, but whoever consorts with harlots squanders his wealth."^[v]

Upon his return, his father treats the young man with a generosity far more than he has a right to expect.^[7] He is given the best robe, a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet.^[vi] Jewish philosopher Philo observes:^[6]

Parents often do not lose thought for their wastrel (*asoton*) children.... In the same way, God too...takes thought also for those who live a misspent life, thereby giving them time for reformation, and also keeping within the bounds His own merciful nature.

The Pesikta Rabbati has a similar story:^[6]

A king had a son who had gone astray from his father on a journey of a hundred days. His friends said to him, 'Return to your father.' He said, 'I cannot.' Then his father sent word, 'Return as far as you can, and I will come the rest of the way to you.' So God says, 'Return to me, and I will return to you.'

The older son, in contrast, seems to think in terms of "law, merit, and reward,"^[7] rather than "love and graciousness."^[7] He may represent the Pharisees who were criticizing Jesus.^[7]

The last few verses of the parable summarize the tale in accordance with the Jewish teaching of the two ways of acting: the way of life (obedience) and the way of death (sin).^[8] God, according to Judaism, rejoices over and grants more graces to repentant sinners than righteous souls who don't need repentance.^[9]

Following the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin, this is the last of three parables about loss and redemption that Jesus tells after the Pharisees and religious leaders accuse him of welcoming and eating with "sinners."^[10] The father's joy described in the parable reflects divine love:^[10] the "boundless mercy of God,"^[11] and "God's refusal to limit the measure of his grace."^[10]

Commemoration and use

Orthodox

The Eastern Orthodox Church traditionally reads this story on the Sunday of the Prodigal Son,^[12] which in their liturgical year is the Sunday before Meatfare Sunday and about two weeks before the beginning of Great Lent. One common kontakion hymn of the occasion reads:

I have recklessly forgotten Your glory, O Father;
And among sinners I have scattered the riches which
You gave to me.
And now I cry to You as the Prodigal:
I have sinned before You, O merciful Father;
Receive me as a penitent and make me as one of Your
hired servants.



Stained glass window based on the parable, Charleston, South Carolina

Catholic

In his 1984 apostolic exhortation titled, in Latin, "*Reconciliatio et paenitentia*" ('*Reconciliation and Penance*'), Pope John Paul II used this parable to explain the process of conversion and reconciliation. Emphasizing that God the Father is "rich in mercy" and always ready to forgive, he stated that

reconciliation is a *gift on his part*. He stated that for the Church her "mission of reconciliation is the initiative, full of compassionate love and mercy, of that God who is love."^[13] He also explored the issues raised by this parable in his second encyclical, "*Dives in misericordia*" ('*Rich in Mercy*'), issued in 1980.^[14]

In the arts

Art

Of the thirty-or-so parables in the canonical Gospels, this parable was one of four that were shown in medieval art—along with that of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, the Dives and Lazarus, and the Good Samaritan—almost to the exclusion of the others, though not mixed in with the narrative scenes of the Life of Christ.^[15] (The Labourers in the Vineyard also appears in Early Medieval works.)

From the Renaissance, the numbers shown widened slightly, and the various scenes of the Prodigal Son—the high living, herding the pigs, and the return—became the clear favourite. Albrecht Dürer made a famous engraving, the *Prodigal Son amongst the Pigs* (1496), a popular subject in the Northern Renaissance. Rembrandt depicted several scenes from the parable, especially the final episode, which he etched, drew, or painted on several occasions during his career.^[16] At least one of his works—i.e., *The Prodigal Son in the Tavern*, a portrait of himself as the Son revelling with his



Rembrandt, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* 1662–1669 (Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg)



The Polish Rider; possibly the prodigal son. The subject is of much discussion.

wife—is, like many artists' depictions, a way of dignifying a genre tavern scene (if the title was indeed the original intention of the artist). His late *Return of the Prodigal Son* (1662–1669) is one of his most popular works.

The Prodigal Son is a sculpture in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, by George Grey Barnard that depicts the loving reunion of the father and son from the "Parable of the Prodigal Son."^[17]



Gerard van Honthorst, 1623, like many works of the period, allows a genre scene with moral content.

Stage

In the 15th and 16th centuries, the theme was a sufficiently popular subject that the '*Prodigal Son* play' can be seen as a subgenre of the English morality play. Examples include *The Rare Triumphs of Love and Fortune*, *The Disobedient Child*, and *Acolastus*.^[18]

Notable adaptations for performance include

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Many of these adaptations added to the original Biblical material to lengthen the story. For example, *The Prodigal* (1955) film took considerable liberties, such as adding a temptress priestess of Astarte to the tale.^[19]

Music

- an 1680 *Filius prodigus*, H.399 & H.399 a, oratorio by Marc-Antoine Charpentier
- an 1869 oratorio by Arthur Sullivan;
- an 1880 opera by Amilcare Ponchielli;
- a 1884 cantata by Claude Debussy;
- a 1929 ballet choreographed by George Balanchine to music by Sergei Prokofiev;
- a 1957 ballet by Hugo Alfvén;^[20] and
- an 1968 opera by Benjamin Britten.

Popular music

The parable is referenced in the last verse of the traditional Irish folk tune "The Wild Rover":

I'll go home to me parents, confess what I've done
and I'll ask them to pardon their prodigal son

"Jump Around" by the Los Angeles rap group House of Pain (1992) includes a verse by member Everlast, who references the parable as well as the Bible itself:

Word to your moms, I came to drop bombs
I got more rhymes than the Bible's got Psalms
And just like the Prodigal Son I've returned
Anyone stepping to me you'll get burned

Other references and semi-adaptations include

- "Prodigal Son" by Reverend Robert Wilkins, which tells the story of the parable, is probably better known by the Rolling Stones cover version, which is featured on *Beggars Banquet* (1968).
- "Prodigal Man", written by Ted Nugent, was performed by The Amboy Dukes as the second track of their third album *Migration* (1969)
- "Let Me In" by The Osmonds presents a version of the parable as part of their Mormon concept album *The Plan* (1973), and was a hit song in its time.
- "Prodigal Son" by Steel Pulse, featured on the British Reggae band's debut album *Handsworth Revolution* (1979), recreates the Biblical story as a Rastafarian parable.
- "Prodigal Son" by British heavy-metal band Iron Maiden appears on their second album *Killers* (1981).
- "The First Time" by U2, featured on *Zooropa* (1993), is based on the parable but suggests an alternate ending to the story.

- "Make Me A Servant" by Kelly Willard (1982) could be argued as being based on what the son says to his father when he returns home.
- "The Prodigal Son Suite" by Keith Green is featured on his *The Prodigal Son* (1983) album and is one of the first posthumous releases by the late piano player and gospel singer.
- "When God Ran" by Benny Hester (1985), which is based on the parable, is another such song from the '80s Christian music scene.
- "Who Cares?" by Extreme was influenced by the parable and appears on the album *III Sides to Every Story* (1992).
- "Prodigal Son" by Kid Rock appears on his second album *The Polyfuze Method* (1993). The Detroit musician later re-recorded the track for his *History of Rock* (2000) compilation album.
- "She Walked Away" by BarlowGirl was influenced by the parable^[21] and is featured on the Christian rock trio's 2004 self-titled album.
- "One" a progressive rock concept album released by Neal Morse in 2004 is based on the prodigal son story.
- "The Prodigal Son" by the "Indie" rock band, Two Gallants, as part of their *What the Toll Tells* (2006) album.
- "The Prodigal Son's Prayer" by country artist Dierks Bentley, featured on the album *Long Trip Alone* (2006), is based on the son's perspective of coming home after he's ruined himself in the world.
- "Please Come Home" by Dustin Kensrue is the titular song of the album of the same name released in 2007.^[22]
- "Prodigal Son" by Bad Religion is featured on *New Maps of Hell* (2007).
- "Prodigal Son" by rock band Sevendust is featured on *Chapter VII: Hope and Sorrow* (2008).
- "Modern Day Prodigal Son" by Brantley Gilbert is featured on the album of the same name from 2009.
- "Prodigal Son" by Gideon appears on the post-hardcore band's second album *Milestone* (2012).
- The parable is used as inspiration for several songs in The Oh Hellos' album 'Through the Deep Dark Valley'.
- "Prodigal Son" by Jamie's Elsewhere, a post-hardcore band.
- "Left Hand Free" by English indie rock band alt-J (2014) references the parable in the first verse.
- "Prodigal" by Sidewalk Prophets is included in the Christian band's *Something Different* (2015) album. The song is uplifting, with lyrics that are directed towards the titular Son from the parable, or any person who is or has felt like they are in a similar situation.
- "When the Prodigal Comes Home" by gospel artists Tribute Quartet (2016).
- "Fire in Bone" is a retelling of the parable by the rock band the Killers, featured on their album *Imploding the Mirage* (2020).

Literature

Another literary tribute to this parable is Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen's 1992 book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, in which he describes his own spiritual journey infused with understanding, based on an encounter with Rembrandt's painting that depicts the son's return. The book deals with three personages: the younger, prodigal son; the self-righteous, resentful older son; and the compassionate father—all of whom the author identifies with personally.^[23] An earlier work with similarities to the parable is "*Le retour de l'enfant prodigue*" ('The Return of the Prodigal Son'), a short story by André Gide.^[24]

Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem giving an interpretation of the younger brother's perspective. The poem appears as the heading to the fifth chapter, titled "The Prodigal Son", of his 1901 novel *Kim*.^{[25][26]}

The Parable is a recurring theme in the works of Rainer Maria Rilke, who interpreted it in a different way to the conventional reading. Rilke's version is not so concerned with redemption and the forgiveness of family: the love of the family, and human love in general, was seen as less worthy than unreciprocated love, which is the purest form of love. In loving the family less, the Son can love God more, even if this love is not returned.^{[27][28]}

The theme of the Prodigal Son plays a major role in Anne Tyler's novel *A Spool of Blue Thread*.^[29]

The parable is also referred to in two comedies by William Shakespeare, specifically *The Merchant Of Venice* and *As You Like It*, as well as in Shakespeare's romance, *The Winter's Tale*.^[vii]

In one of his clemency petitions to the British government in 1913, the Indian independence activist Vinayak Damodar Savarkar described himself as a "prodigal son" longing to return to the "parental doors of the government".

Similar parable in Mahayana Buddhism

A parable of a lost son can also be found in the Mahayana Buddhist *Lotus Sutra*.^{[30][31]} The two parables are so similar in their outline and many details that several scholars have assumed that one version has influenced the other or that both texts share a common origin.^[32] However, an influence of the biblical story on the Lotus sutra is regarded as unlikely given the early dating of the stratum of the sutra containing the Buddhist parable.^[32]

Despite their similarities, both parables continue differently after the two meet for the first time at the son's return. In the biblical story, there is an immediate reunion of the two. In contrast, in the Lotus sutra, the poor son does not recognize the rich man as his father. When the father sends out some attendants to welcome the son, the son panics, fearing some kind of retribution. The father then lets the son leave without telling him of their kinship. However, he gradually draws the son closer to him by employing him in successively higher positions, only to tell him of their kinship in the end.^[30] In the Buddhist parable, the father symbolises the Buddha, and the son symbolises any human being. Their kinship symbolises that any being has Buddha nature. The concealment of the kinship of the father to his son is regarded as a skillful means (Sanskrit: *upāya*).^[33]

See also

- Ministry of Jesus
- Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard regarding the theme of God's unmerited grace, as distinguished from the idea of "earning" God's favour.

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The Return of the Prodigal Son
(Leonello Spada, Louvre, Paris)

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