

# The Parable of the Prodigal Son

[www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources](http://www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources)

## Keywords

Christianity, beliefs, forgiveness, repentance, family, being lost and being found, fairness

## Notes for teachers

This very well-known parable which is often taken as presenting a clear set of beliefs about what God is like. Most Christian readings take the father in the story to represent God, who actively watches and waits for those who have turned away from him to return. When they do, his welcome is generous and full. The key phrases explaining the father's perspective are repeated: the younger son was lost and is found; he was dead and now he is alive. The "prodigal" in the title refers to the extravagant way the younger son wastes his inheritance in the far country; but it is also a good word to describe the almost carefree way the father chooses to welcome him home.

The structure of the parable is unusually complicated and extended compared to the other parables Jesus tells in the Gospel. In this, the parable of the Prodigal Son is most like one of the other famous parables to be found only in Luke's Gospel, the parable of the Good Samaritan. But we should note that in the story there are never more than two people or groups speaking to each other: the father never speaks to both sons at once, for example. It's a very similar structure to the one we find in fairy tales or folk tales.

A further unusual element here is the way we are given an indication of what the characters are thinking: we hear the younger son's thought processes as he "comes to his senses" and realizes how much better off he would be at home, even as a servant; we hear that the father is "filled with pity" when he sees his son on the road home; and we are told that the older son is "angry" because of the way his brother has been treated. Unlike many parables, these characters are fleshed out a little, and perhaps because of that readers have been drawn to the story and the

© Alison Jack, University of Edinburgh, 2016, CC BY NC.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

You are free to use, share and adapt this work. Not for commercial use.

Bible verses quoted are from the Good News Bible © 1994 published by the Bible Societies/HarperCollins Publishers Ltd

UK, Good News Bible © American Bible Society 1966, 1971, 1976, 1992. Used with permission.

way it is played out. Added to that, of course, is the very human picture it presents about the deep emotions involved in family life, in the time of Jesus as well as today.

Some of the issues to highlight about the story in its historical setting would include the destabilizing and shocking nature of the younger son's request for his share of his inheritance. It's as if he wishes his father were already dead. It would certainly disrupt the system of land ownership which would have been clung to in an agrarian society such as this. No wonder the older son is angry when the younger son returns, empty-handed: another mouth to feed from an already depleted resource. Some scholars have even suggested that the father has to make such a public display of reconciliation, and offer a feast for the neighbourhood, in order to protect his son from the anger of the villagers, who would not be happy to see such a rebellious character return.

In dealing with this story, modern readers might also want to ask why there are no female characters involved here. Would it be a different story if the children were girls and it was the mother who welcomed back her child? And such speculation, set free from consideration about what Jesus meant by telling the story, might prompt questions about why the younger son left in the first place. Some modern readers have speculated about how this story might be heard by those for whom family life is not a safe and welcoming environment. To a victim of abuse, for example, the return of the younger son to the family home might not read as such a positive development. The father's welcome might be heard as sinister rather than joyful, and the lack of response from both sons to the father's actions in the story might leave open a sense of unease.

The parable allows for such readings because of its open structure and power as a story. In terms of its context in the Gospel of Luke, its focus is clear. It is the third of three parables (the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin come first) which Jesus is presented as telling in response to the grumbling of Pharisees and teachers of the Law. These establishment figures are annoyed by the way "This man [Jesus] welcomes outcasts and even eats with them!" (Luke 15.1-2). Luke's Jesus seems to identify the Pharisees with the older brother, and the tax collectors and other undesirables with whom Jesus spends time are portrayed as those who are to be welcomed to the feast. The reader is invited to identify either with the younger son, far from God but promised a warm homecoming; or with the older son, and to be less judgmental and more welcoming. But this is only one way to read the story and Luke's interpretation should not close down the debate.

## Questions for Discussion

### Comprehension of the story

What does the younger son do in the story?

Describe the reactions of the father and the older brother when the younger son returns.

Is there a difference between what we are told about the younger son when he leaves home, and what the older brother says about the way he behaved?

### Application to other contexts

What does “home” mean to each of these characters? What does it mean to you?

When is it right to leave home; when is it right to stay? Is it always a good idea to return home, especially when you are in trouble?

Are the father’s actions fair to everyone?

### Reflecting on wider Christian issues

According to this story, what do you think is important to Jesus?

For Christians, what does this story teach them about what God is like?

Does the younger son deserve to be welcomed back? Does this matter? Are there other stories Jesus told, or which are told about him, in which surprising, even shocking, things happen?

## The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15.11-32)

Jesus went on to say, “There was once a man who had two sons. The younger one said to him, ‘Father, give me my share of the property now.’ So the man divided his property between his two sons. After a few days the younger son sold his part of the property and left home with the money. He went to a country far away, where he wasted his money in reckless living. He spent everything he had. Then a severe famine spread over that country, and he was left without a thing. So he went to work for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him out to his farm to take care of the pigs. He wished he could fill himself with the bean pods the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything to eat. At last he came to his senses and said, ‘All my father's hired workers have more than they can eat, and here I am about to starve! I will get up and go to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers.”’ So he got up and started back to his father.

“He was still a long way from home when his father saw him; his heart was filled with pity, and he ran, threw his arms around his son, and kissed him. ‘Father,’ the son said, ‘I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son.’ But the father called to his servants. ‘Hurry!’ he said. ‘Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Then go and get the prize calf and kill it, and let us celebrate with a feast! For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.’ And so the feasting began.

“In the meantime the older son was out in the field. On his way back, when he came close to the house, he heard the music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him, ‘What's going on?’ ‘Your brother has come back home,’ the servant answered, ‘and your father has killed the prize calf, because he got him back safe and sound.’ The older brother was so angry that he would not go into the house; so his father came out and begged him to come in. But he spoke back to his father, ‘Look, all these years I have worked for you like a slave, and I have never disobeyed your orders. What have you given me? Not even a goat for me to have a feast with my friends! But this son of yours wasted all your property on prostitutes, and when he comes back home, you kill the prize calf for him!’ ‘My son,’ the father answered, ‘you are always here with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be happy, because your brother was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.’”