

THE STORY OF THE LOST SON

Luke 15:11-32

The Parable of the Prodigal (Lost) Son is one of the well-loved parts of Scripture. It has been depicted many times in art (such as Rembrandt's famous painting) and is a great plot to use for stories. I don't mean for you to read all of these, but just to give you a feel for how popular this is in modern music, here is a list of songs based on it:

"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.

"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 Polyfuzed Method](#) (1993). The Detroit musician later re-recorded the track for his [History of Rock](#) (2000) [compilation 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).

Think of how great this story is. The young son leaves his family, wastes everything, then goes back hoping he can at least be a servant to his father. But instead the father welcomes him back with open arms! It is easy to think of that story in terms of the amazing stories we hear of people living destructive lives and then coming to faith in God because He forgives and accepts them with open arms!

But none of those songs and few famous works of art depict the second son. He doesn't run away. The older son knows what has happened. Nothing is secret in a village like that. This son knew what his brother had requested. And Jesus says that he got his share of the inheritance at the same time as his brother. But he does nothing. If you asked someone in the world in which Jesus lived who must reconcile the prodigal son, the answer would be "the older brother." He should be the one to step in and try to reconcile between his father and brother. And he would do that not so much for his brother's sake, but for his father. If he could reconcile them, then this would restore peace and honor to his family. And even if his brother would leave, he would still plead with him to return home quickly. But this older brother does nothing.

It should be no surprise that this brother refuses to come into the party when the brother comes home. It is not just that his brother was home, but that he was welcomed home in peace. If he was simply told the younger brother was back, he would have rushed in to make sure his brother was justly punished. But he stays outside, moping about how he never even got a goat, much less the fattened calf, to share with his friends.

Yet, for him to refuse to come in when his father requested it was a shock. In the book of Esther, we hear the story of how Persian emperor Ahasuerus requests that his queen, Vashti, come to a banquet he is holding. She refuses. This is such an affront to the emperor, that he has her deposed. The son is shaming his father. And he adds to this by failing when his father comes out to address him as “father.” He has not broken a law, but he has broken the relationship with his father just as much as his brother did. The shepherd who searches for the lost sheep, the woman who sweeps out her house looking for the coin, the father who welcomes back the son, all have made an effort to win back the lost. But this son does nothing.

Who is this older son? So often it is you and me. Not only have we broken our relationship to God like the younger son, we also fail to help others who are lost. Notice the older son is mad at how the brother “devoured *your* living with harlots.” But that part of the inheritance was at that point the younger brother’s, not the family’s. He felt that the reason he was accepted by his father was because he had been good. He felt that he had earned whatever he got from his father. This was as much a slap in the face to the father’s love as his brother who had gone off and wished that his father was dead. And that is what you and I say to God when we try to “trade off” our goodness to Him, when we demand what we want from Him, because we think He owes it to us.

Yet, like the prodigal son, the older son is just a part of the story. The real story lies with the most important character—the father.

We might think, “What father would not welcome back a wayward son?” Just think of how good a plot that is for a “Hallmark” movie special. Yet that fails to see the sacrifices the father made.

The father did what no village father would do. He granted the younger son his request. But even though the father lets the son sever their relationship, he does not disown the son. Then there would be no chance of reconciliation. Instead the father is left in his suffering, holding his end of the relationship. And that suffering leaves open the possibility of the son’s return.

William Temple said, “God grants us freedom, even to reject His love.” Why? So we can love God. Instead of being robots that simply do what He says, He loves us enough to have a relationship of love with us, even if that means having to experience as we throw mud in His face and say, “I don’t need you.”

Yet, there is more to it. When the younger son comes back, notice what the father is doing. He is looking out for the son. He hasn't given up on him. And when he sees him, he *runs* out to greet him. Then he embraces him. This would be a shock to families in Jesus' time. It was totally beneath the dignity of a father to run, to show such a display in public, even more so for a son who had so dishonored him. And this son had caused him suffering, not just the anguish of a broken relationship, but all the suffering that had come with giving him 1/3 of the family wealth.

So who is that "Father?" Of course we say God. But do we just mean God as God the Father, as the God, almighty who can do anything and by decree simply says we are forgiven and restored? No, this is the God who *ran* to us, who became one of us in Jesus. This is the God who not only suffered the anguish of our rejection, but the results of the relationship we broke by having to suffer it on the cross. This is the God, Father, whom we rejected, yet suffered through waiting for us. This is the God, Jesus Christ, who sacrificed Himself on the cross. This is the God, Holy Spirit, whose life-giving love was kicked out of us by our sin against Him.

When we are rejected, we can do one of two things. We can seek revenge, or we can suffer, and through that suffering seek to forgive. A village proverb says, "He could not beat the donkey, so he beat the saddle." Or in Ethiopia where our friend Kebede works there is a story of the elephant that inadvertently steps on the leopard's son and kills him. The leopard wants revenge. He gathers his friends together. "Who has killed the leopard's son?" one leopard asks. No one wants to say, "The elephant." So one young leopard says, "The goats did it." They go out and kill a hundred goats.

But what did God do? He suffered, suffered the cross, so He can forgive.

The lost son hopes to get back as a servant of his father. If he succeeds, he may end up thinking like his older brother, that he deserves this. But his father's shocking love puts an end to that. We might think that the son is never given a chance to make his well-prepared speech because his father doesn't give him a chance to. No, he doesn't say it because he knows it won't work. He realizes in His father's all-giving love, that all his bargaining, all his excuses, all his attempts to manipulate the situation won't work. All he can do is accept totally His father's love.

So it is with us. The whole point of the cross is to silence all our excuses and attempts to work out a "deal" with God. The cross makes us throw ourselves at the mercy of God and receive that mercy, like the lost son welcomed back by the father.

The father's love doesn't end there. The older son, who is insulting him by refusing to come to the banquet, is still loved by the father. He goes out to this son, which was as shocking as him running out to greet his younger son. But this older son fails to call him father, he has also broken the relationship with his father. The father calls him "son" but with a word that shows great endearment, the exact word Mary uses when she finds Jesus in the temple.

God extends His love out to us “older” sons. That is what the cross shows us even after we are forgiven. If God loves me that much, He loves others. I can’t just sit tight while others have broken relationships with God.

Jesus tells His parable to show what God does, not just the Father in heaven, but Jesus Himself as he welcomes the lost. To reject Jesus is the same as the older son rejecting his father. And to reject the lost is to reject Jesus, to reject how God comes to us, not because we deserve it, but because God loves us totally.

Jesus’ parable ends without a climax. We don’t know what the older brother does. But we know what Jesus has done for us. He reaches out to us in total love. He put Himself on the cross. Now He shows us the world, those lost in addiction, in the things of this world, in social rejection, in prison, estranged from their families, those who have left God. And we become like Jesus, like the Father, embracing them in His loving arms.