

This transcript accompanies the *Cambridge in your Classroom* video on 'What does the parable of the Prodigal Son mean?'

For more information about this video, or the series, visit

<https://www.divinity.cam.ac.uk/study-here/open-days/cambridge-your-classroom>



What does the parable of the Prodigal Son mean?

Dr James Carleton Paget

Faculty of Divinity

My name is James Carleton Paget, and I lecture here in the University, in the New Testament and the origins of Christianity, and the thing I believe in passionately is trying to make Christianity plain to everybody in terms of the extraordinary phenomenon, the odd phenomenon, the strange phenomenon it was, when it first emerged.

Many people think, because we live in a society with churches everywhere, that there's something, that somehow Christianity is conventional. But when it emerged, it was far from conventional. It was odd, peculiar and strange. And if we can grasp that, by looking at it historically in a deep and meaningful way, we will, I think, learn to appreciate both the historical art, but also the strange things that made Christianity apparently a compelling phenomenon in the Ancient World.

According to the Gospels, especially Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus often spoke in parables. These are sometimes

defined as stories used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson. These stories draw their imagery and content from the world which Jesus inhabited, and usually concern themselves with the lives of ordinary people, but in ways which are frequently surprising.

One such story is the parable of the prodigal son, or, put another way, the parable of the wasteful, or extravagant, son. The title was not given to it by Jesus, nor by Luke, the only gospel writer to record it. And we shall have reason to return to the appropriateness of this title later on.

But first, to the story itself. Jesus begins by introducing us to a man who has two sons, the younger of whom asks if he can be given his share of his inheritance. The father agrees, and the son, after converting his share (one assumes land) into cash, leaves his home for another country where he squanders all his money. Soon, his situation is so desperate that he has become a lowly

employee on a farm, so hungry and destitute that he envies the food which is fed to the pigs whom he looks after. In these trying circumstances, he resolves to return to his father's home and to offer himself as one of the latter's hired workers. As he nears his home, his father sees him, runs towards him, and before the son has a chance to say all the things he wants, embraces him and tells his servants to prepare a feast for the son.

Meanwhile, the older son, who has stayed at home and loyally worked for his father, hears from the servants of the events which have recently occurred and is understandably disconsolate about what he takes to be the unfair treatment of his dissolute brother, and refuses to go to the feast. The father leaves the feast and to answer his son's complaint, stating that the elder son is always with him and will receive all that belongs to the father, claiming 'but we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and is alive; he was lost and is found'. The parable ends here with questions about the fate of the various characters left unresolved.

What is this about? Who is at the centre of this parable?

Is it the prodigal son, the son who leaves his father and squanders his wealth? Is it the two sons who become prodigal sons, or is it the whole family, a tale of a form of dysfunction? Or could it be the father, the father who is there at the beginning of the parable and at the end? So what of the idea then that the father is at the centre of the parable? When the prodigal son thinks about returning home, he thinks about it in terms of words that he will say to his father. Only the father converses with his sons, and the father is central to the events that occur at the end of the parable.

Let us look at the actions of the father — they are in many ways extraordinary. First

of all, he does something that the Bible does not commend. He allows the son to inherit from him before he has, in fact, died. Secondly, he allows the son to leave him, in spite of the fact that at that time it was expected that the children of their parents would look after their parents in old age. And when the prodigal son returns, he does not allow him to speak, asking for forgiveness, he calls rather for a magnificent feast to occur, at which the only fatted calf available is to be slaughtered. And finally, when his older son behaves towards him in a rude manner and refuses to come to the feast, rather than rebuking him, as he should have done, he leaves the feast, opening himself up to ridicule. What will the guests think that he's leaving the feast to deal with this crotchety son? And having left the feast, he tells the son that he will, in fact, inherit all that he has.

The father then appears as what we would term a countercultural figure. His failure to condemn the apparently atrocious behaviour of his two sons, is remarkable in a hierarchical society, where a father was meant to condemn. The father, however, crosses conventions. He does not conform.

But how, then, to understand him and the parable? Some hold the father to be God, and understand the parable as an indication of how graciously God acts towards sinners. But does that grasp the whole parable? Does it grasp the beginning of the parable, the complex interchange between the characters? Or, did Jesus fail to give a conclusion, or bring this parable to a conclusion, because he didn't want people to emerge from hearing it with some glib, easy conclusion.

As the famous American poet Emily Dickinson wrote, 'tell the truth, tell it slant, success in circuits lies', or put another way: the truth, because it is so profound, cannot be captured in the simple.