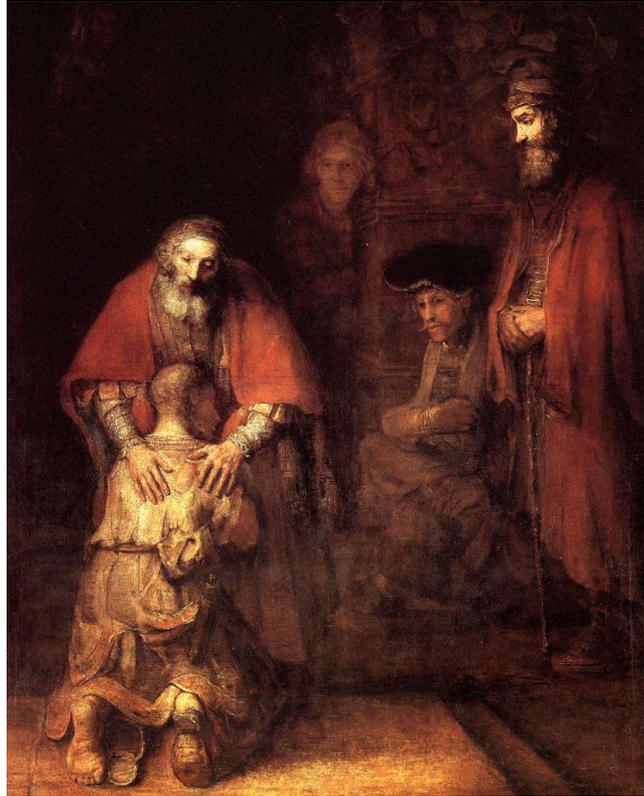


## Imaging the Word



Rembrandt van Rijn, [\*The Return of the Prodigal Son\*](#), c. 1661–1669

Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg

Of Rembrandt's masterpiece *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, it has been said that those who have seen the original in Leningrad "may be forgiven for claiming [it] as the greatest picture ever painted." It is an image that beautifully and touchingly portrays perhaps the most significant moment in the life of any person: the moment of spiritual homecoming.

In this painting, the son returns home from traveling the world. He has wasted his inheritance and fallen into poverty. Rembrandt depicts him kneeling before his father, in a posture of repentance. He is asking for forgiveness. In a gesture of mercy, his Father receives him tenderly. Leaning towards the son, he places his hands gently upon the son's shoulders. The son's head leans into the father. The tender hands of the father seem to suggest not just the care of a father, but that of a mother too, as the left hand is large and masculine and the right hand is small and soft.

One writer suggests that this may be Rembrandt's 'most moving painting', but also his quietest, conveying a moment that stretches into eternity. Like many before him, Rembrandt identified personally with the parable of the Prodigal Son. It was, for him, almost autobiographical. Completing his first etching of the story in 1636, he drew, etched, and painted it for more than three decades, before completing it in 1669, his final masterpiece.

In the background of the painting, we can just make out two shadowy figures. There is a barely visible woman, who may be the mother. Next to her, there is seated a man, whose wealthy dress indicates that he may be a tax collector, or an adviser to the estate. On the far right of the painting, and in the foreground stands the elder son with his arms crossed in judgment. His response to the scene before him differs markedly from that of his father: "All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours," he complains, "yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property – he and his loose women – you kill the calf we have been fattening!" (Luke 15:29-30)



["Reconciliation"](#) by Margaret Adams Parker, 2005  
Duke Divinity School

In the sculpture of this scene by contemporary artist Margaret Adams Parker, we see many similarities to Rembrandt's painting, yet with even greater emotional evocation. The Prodigal



has returned and upon meeting his father, has flung his arm around him, clinging to him: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” He is absorbed in his own need for forgiveness. And the Father is himself stooped, wrapping one arm around the prodigal with a gesture that is like a caress. “...this son of mine was dead and is alive again...”

But with the other arm he reaches out to his other son. With a yearning expression on his face, the Father beseeches the Older Brother. “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” But the Older Brother is tense, reluctant, even truculent. “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command...” His face is rigid and his body is itself turned away from the Father and Prodigal.

But the Father’s hands – aged but firm – grasp the Older Brother’s clasped arms. The focus is on the Father persisting, reaching out. He is the bridge between the two brothers, embracing the Prodigal but pleading with the Older Brother: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”



In his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, Dutch priest Henri Nouwen writes of our need for repentance, our need for conversion. In speaking about Rembrandt, he speaks also for us all: “Rembrandt is as much the elder son of the parable as he is the younger,” Nouwen observes, “he had lived a life in which neither the lostness of the younger son nor the lostness of the elder son was alien to him. Both needed healing and forgiveness. Both needed to come home.” Both needed the embrace of a forgiving father.

But from the story itself, as well as from Rembrandt's painting, it is clear that the hardest conversion to go through is the conversion of the one who stayed home. The basic message of the Gospel—the message that we are loved and forgiven by God—speaks directly to our basic human need of forgiveness. When Rembrandt looked at his life, he knew there was much to be forgiven: not just the rebellious folly and errors of his youth, but also the pride and complacency that come with success and reputation.

However, when we imagine ourselves into this remarkable image, we should not allow ourselves to become too distracted by the question of whether we identify with one son or the other; indeed, we should not be distracted by the sons at all. Ultimately they are not the focus of the painting. Rather, it is about the forgiving Father.

And we see this in both pieces of art. The focus, the central point of illumination in these depictions, is the gentle face of the father. A face that speaks eloquently of the love and mercy of the One who, out of eternity, met us in his Son. A father who longs to welcome us home, and who spares no expense in celebrating our return. A father who loves us unceasingly and extravagantly. This is a father who comes to us, even when we are still a long way off, and calls out, "Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it; we will celebrate by having a feast, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

Rembrandt painted his masterpiece in 1669, in the years before his death. It is, as one writer says, his 'final word'. This embrace of the prodigal son is more than just Rembrandt's final word, though; it is also the final word of God, "My son, you are with me always, and all I have is yours. But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life. He was lost, and is found". Amen.