

My name is Dr. Ken Bailey and it has been my privilege over all of my life, my active life, for 40 years to teach New Testament at various institutes and seminaries in the Middle East. And my heritage in the Middle East goes farther back in that my parents also spent their life in the Middle East and I had 7 years of my childhood there. The whole world of the Middle East Arabic speaking Christian community is unknown to us in the West. We hear the word Arab and we immediately think Muslim, but no, there are 15 million Arabic speaking Christians in the Middle East and they have been there since the days of the Apostles. Their heritage and tradition is unknown to us. It's been my privilege to participate with them, and insights particularly into the stories of and about Jesus can be enormously enriched once we take into account the reality of the Middle Eastern cultural world where Jesus lived and where He also created the stories that ring with His name.g

Today we are going to look at the great story of the Prodigal Son, and try in a brief span of time to go through it highlighting the points where we need some cultural revision in order to understand it more profoundly. But before we get into the story itself, there are 4 areas that we need to have in focus before we start in. And the first is that in the Gospel of Luke in chapter 15 where this story appears, the text says, "He told them this parable" - singular - then there are 3 stories. That means we've got to look at these stories as 3 parts of a single presentation. And in fact it is because the text opens where the Pharisees, a crowd of people who felt that duty before God was related primarily to a precise observance of law, came to Jesus and complained saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." Eating was a big deal for them because they were living amongst people who did not keep the law in a precise fashion ( they called them the *am ha-arets* - the people of the land) and they were under criticism for doing so. You know, you should withdraw off to a monastery in the desert, and they said no, we can still keep our ceremonial purity and observe the law in a precise fashion even though we are living amongst Jews who don't, as long as we're very careful about meals. When we sit down to eat meals, no outsiders, only those who are ceremonially pure and who are keeping the law in a precise fashion are invited to eat meals with us. They see Jesus as a rabbi, they call him a rabbi, he is a learned man, he is a scholar according to the expectations of scholarship in his day, but he eats with "sinners", people who don't keep the law. They don't like this. So they come, and Jesus defends himself by telling these 3 stories. Now, when he does, the first story is about a shepherd and a lost sheep, the second story is about a woman and a lost coin, the third is the story we're focusing on and it can best be called the Compassionate Father and the 2 lost sons. So, they're saying to Jesus, "this man" (talking about him), "receives sinners and eats with them". Jesus replies by saying I will tell you a story about a man who sat down with a sinner and ate with him. In the story, the story of the Prodigal Son, that man is called Father. So we have traditional thought, ah ha, that is a symbol for God - period. But when Jesus says, this man receives sinners and eats with them and Jesus says, yes, you're right, I do, absolutely. Let me tell you a story about a man who sat down with a sinner and ate with him, and that man is called Father. That means that that man must, necessarily, at some point in the story refer to the person of Jesus. Here's what they are accusing him of doing, and He says, yes I'll tell you a story about a man who does this. So to look for where in the story is Jesus talking about himself is absolutely unavoidable.

Alright, then we notice the 3 stories, and given our traditional reading of them, we have created, not the stories themselves, but our interpretation has created a critical problem. In the story of the good shepherd, they're out in the wilderness, the sheep is lost, and the shepherd leaves the 99 we're told, goes after the lost sheep and brings it back. He doesn't go home and say, "well I hope that sheep gets home", and then in the middle of the night he hears some noise outside the sheepfold and he gets up and goes out the looks out over the top of the fence and, "Oh, you made it back, great, come on in", and he opens the door and the sheep comes in to the sheepfold. No, the shepherd has got to go out and find the sheep, and in fact carry it back. Then there's the story about a woman and a lost coin, and she doesn't lose her coin and say "gee I wonder what happened to that coin, well it will show up sometime" and starts getting supper and all of a sudden click, the coin flips out of the crack in the floor and lands on the table and she says "Oh there you are" and picks it up and puts it into her purse. That's not the way it happens. The story says she has to get down on her knees, and she's got to light a lamp, and she's got to search diligently to find the coin. The coin will not find itself. Our reading of the story of the Prodigal Son is that he gets home on his own, no help from anyone, thank you very much. And so it looks like the first 2 stories are on the one side and the other story is on the other, and there is a direct clash between them. In the history of the Christian faith, there are 2 major figures, who have argued the theology ( they don't use these texts) but they argue the

theology that I have just referred to. And the first is Augustine, early fifth century Latin scholar from North Africa, and the weight of his theology was we cannot return to God. God has to come to us and find us and bring us back to himself. So that's the Augustinian position and it is in harmony with the New Testament which says that God has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ to find us and to get us back into reconciliation with a loving Father. But then, at the time of Augustine, there was another fellow up in England and his name was Pelageus, and he said no, no, no Augustine hasn't got it right. That's not showing sufficient dignity to the human spirit. We don't need any help, we can get home, we can make it on our own. God doesn't have to come to us, we return to God. So all the way through history, you've got the Augustinian view and the Pelagean view, and it looks like in these 3 stories, the first 2 are Augustinian. The shepherd has to come after the sheep, the woman has to come after the coin. And the third story looks very Pelagean, the prodigal can get home on his own, he doesn't need any help at all. Can this be solved, or is Jesus confused? In the first 2 stories, he defines repentance as we're running away, and we allow God to find us and to bring us home. In the third story, as we have traditionally read it, the story says we're in the far country, we're in trouble, we "come to ourselves", we figure out we can solve the problem, and we get home on our own and no Savior and no grace are required, thank you very much. We are going to try and sort this out before we get done. Then also there is a big hole in the story of the Good Shepherd. The story of the good shepherd says, a shepherd has 100 sheep out in the wilderness, he loses one in the wilderness. Then it says he leaves the 99 in the wilderness, he goes after the one, finds it, picks it up, takes it back to the village, and has a big party. And we're sitting there.....what, what about the 99? I mean don't you tie up the sheep you carried home, and you skeedadal out and find the 99, then you lead them home, **then** you have the party? What's this deal about leaving the 99 in the wilderness? That gaping, dramatic hole occurs in the first of these 3 stories, it disappears in the second one, but it comes to full force in the third one. And in the third story we'll find a resolution to the dramatic problem and theological problem, that is created in the telling of the first story.

Alright, then also before we get started, let us talk for just a minute about what the model behind Jesus is as he creates this famous story that we call the story of the Prodigal Son. In fact, I'm deeply convinced that Jesus is retelling the story of Jacob from the point where Jacob gets his inheritance until the time his father dies. This is Genesis chapter 27 verse 1, and through the opening verses of chapter 36. If you read that and compare it to the story of the prodigal son, you will observe that both stories have a patriarch, in both stories there are 2 sons, in both stories the younger son decides he wants to take his inheritance, and he does so in both stories with underhanded means. In both stories the younger son has got to take off into the far country, in both stories the older son stays at home - mad. In both stories in the far country there is a reversal of wealth, Jacob starts off poor and he ends up rich, and the prodigal starts off rich and he ends up poor. The same dramatic theme is there only Jesus has reversed it. In both stories the one in the far country finally decides to come home. When on the way home in the story of Jacob, his father-in-law, Laban finds that the household gods are missing so he comes after Jacob and says, "hey, how come you stole this stuff out of my house before you left". They search and don't find it, and then Laban says to Jacob, "these flocks and herds that you have actually are mine. And these women that you have as your wives, well they're mine too - all that is yours is mine." Jesus picks up that line. I write scripts for films and I also publish plays, so I'm looking for the dramatic elements and the components that make up the drama. Jesus takes that line out of the Jacob story, where Laban says "all that is yours is mine", Jesus turns it around and as we will see puts it into the mouth of the father talking to the older son where he says "all that is mine is yours". Alright, as these 2 boys come back from the far country, Jacob and the prodigal, there is a divine incarnation scene. In the story of Jacob it's an angel, in the story of the prodigal it's his father, and in both cases in the divine incarnation scene there is body contact. In the first case it's a wrestling match, in the second case it's an embrace. In both stories a member of the family goes out of town to "deal with" the son who comes home. In one case it's the father, in the other case it's the older brother, and in both cases the welcomer of the prodigal coming home says he ran, and fell upon his neck and kissed him, and those 3 phrases together only occur in these 2 stories. In both stories there is the best robe of one member of the family put on another member of the family, and nowhere in scripture do you have this referred to except the story of Jacob and the story of the prodigal. In Jacob it's stolen for deception, with the prodigal it's given for reconciliation, and you go on, and on, and on. I have found actually 52 of these and have written a book on the subject called Jacob and the Prodigal. What is Jesus doing? He is retelling the foundational story that gave the community it's name, and it's identity. This is extremely sophisticated. We're dealing with a first-class mind who notices the connections and re-forms the story. It is somebody who is very, very

daring and he has a new vision that can take the community of which he is a part to what he perceives to be a higher level. And we look at Jesus not as a simple little man who tells simple little stories for simple people, but as a first class theologian in the rabbinic style talking in very profound theological ways as he takes the story that forms the identity of the community and retells it. We're going to have to see that as we go.

Alright, now there is something else going on in this text which we have before us, and that is there's some rhetoric in it. And the rhetoric is in two halves, one is in the story of the younger son who goes in to the far country, and the second is the story of the older son who stays at home. And in those stories there are a series of ideas which come to a climax, and then the series repeats backwards. And the climax in the middle in both stories is a soliloquy. And the soliloquy - each of these sons talks about "I want more food". And the prodigal says "I need more food and I think I can get a job and earn it", and the older son complains to his father and says "I need more food but you're giving it away to somebody else". We're supposed to notice that there is a series of ideas that come to that climax, and that there are these two speeches from the two sons and they are exactly in the same position in the two accounts, and we're supposed to notice the inter-relationship between them. The writing up of the story is done with a very sophisticated eye to the rhetorical styles of the classic writing prophets of Israel, particularly Isaiah. So we're dealing with a piece of artwork that is put together so precisely that you in fact can't change a word without goofing up something, kind of like Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

Alright, with that in mind, let's take a look at the story and start examining it one section at a time. The seven sections that we mentioned in the first half of the story we will now look at. We will look at the first one on the screen. You can see it there and it says:

There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, "Father! Give me the share of property that falls to me." And he divided his living between them. (Luke 15: 11-12)

Alright, now let's take a look and see if we can understand what's going on here. A lot of commentators, particularly in the Western world over the last 200 years have said well, I mean this is not a big deal, this is a young man going off the big city to make his fame and fortune, this happens in a lot of families and there is nothing in particularly exceptional going on here. I beg to differ. I don't know of any country in the world where a young boy can get out of high school, and he's a part of a farming family, and he says to his father and mother, "Well I'm out of high school now, I'd like to go off to the big city and have a good time. Why don't you just give me half of the family farm and I'll sell it, and I'll put the money in my pocket and I can go off to Chicago, or New York, or London or Tokyo or wherever and I can really have a good time". I think the parents are going to say to him, "Little boy, when your mother and I decide to divide the inheritance, we will let you know. This doesn't happen to be any of your business, so why don't you go out and get a job!" I don't think this is so strange to Middle Eastern culture. If the kid wants to go off penniless, you know, work a little bit, get a few bucks, get an old jalopy and drive off and have a good time, that's his business. He doesn't ask his father to sell the family farm while he's standing on it, in good health, farming it. That does not happen in any culture. In the Middle East it's even worse. It means "Dad, why don't you drop dead." We've mentioned the comparison between the Jacob story and the story of the Prodigal. In the Jacob story, Jacob gets to be an old man and he says to himself, "I'm about to die, and I think I better settle the inheritance while I still have all my marbles, and so then he says OK I am going to give the blessing which meant the inheritance to my boys." Of course the boys are supposed to say, "No Dad, you're going to live to be 100, take it easy, we don't want to hear this discussion! We know that this is the discussion that comes at the end of your life, but you have many good years, we don't have to talk about this! Esau does it with Jacob the way it's supposed to be done. The boys say nothing. The old man, when he's about to die, he decides he's going to make the division. But in the story of the prodigal son, it's the prodigal who raises the subject, and so far as we know the father is in good health and he is still managing the farm. He is supposed to be told "Little boy, get out of here", and if he is an oriental patriarch, he's going to take the back of his hand, and he's going to strike the kid across the face, and he's going to drive him out of the house. I had a student and he after some years told me that this had in fact happened in his family. That one of his brothers had asked his father for the inheritance. And I said to him, "Nu had, what happened then?" And he said, "Well my father hit him across the face, drove him out of the house and then he said, we the other brothers worked to try and get my brother and my father into the same room so we could talk about it.

“How long did that take?” “Five years.” Before the father was even willing to be in the same room with the brother who had asked for his inheritance. We have got a series of 15 points we’re going to look at where our perception of the story is flawed. There’s the first one. The father grants the request, and not only that, he grants the freedom to sell. Because according to Jewish law of the first century, if the father makes the division, as long as the father is still alive, the land cannot be sold. The father has the right to the “*usifrot*” the profits of the estate, but if he doesn’t spend them then they are added to the capital. This is part of the older sons problem at the end of the story. If Dad keeps the entertainment budget down, then the fatted calf is going to be a part of the capital that the older brother is going to inherit, so he’s not really happy about this killing the fatted calf even though he can’t say anything because his father has the right to do it. Okay, one is the request - unheard of, unthinkable, and the second is the father’s response. Five times in the story this father does not, I repeat does not, act like an oriental patriarch. First of all he grants the request, second he allows the boy to sell which was against Jewish law (we know that because it says he gathered together, but really it’s a banking term which means he turned in to cash) and third when the boy comes back he welcomes him as we will notice later on in this brief series of lectures. When his older son insults him in public he leaves the banquet and with everybody watching he goes out to talk to him. The older son then insults his father, and his father responds in a kindly fashion by saying we must rejoice and not get angry because the son has returned. No oriental patriarch is going to do any of those! This raises for us the question of what Jesus is doing. He is taking something (a father) beyond the culture of his day, and saying here is the model we can use to try and understand God. Jesus is not taking an oriental patriarch as a model for God. He is taking a figure, as Henri Nouwen, the famous Catholic spiritual writer has said in his book *The Return of the Prodigal*, who breaks all of the boundaries of what an oriental patriarch is expected to do. One of our Arabic commentators has said, the shepherd only does those things which we expect a shepherd to do, the woman only does those things which we expect a mother to do, but the father carries out great marvelous divine acts that are beyond anything we have ever seen or expected from an earthly father. It is somewhat dangerous if you take a metaphor and use it for God - any metaphor. Because you are likening God to something human, and there’s a danger that you will take your perceptions of that human being and then apply them to God, and so we talk about God as “our Father” in the Lord’s Prayer, it’s easy for us to take fathers as we have known them and apply them to God, and fathers, human fathers, and human mothers are frail sinners and they make lots of mistakes and so we goof up our understanding of God when we do that, and in fact that is a form of idolatry. Every major philosopher and theologian is very careful to define his or her own terms. We must allow Jesus to do that himself. In fact he takes the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hosea, I’m convinced, where God is likened to a father and the father says “I’m God and not man and I will not come with my fierce anger.” Namely Israel, the child of the covenant has broken the covenant and violated the law and God is angry. But because he is God and not man, he manages to reprocess that anger into grace and extend love to Israel. Jesus starts with this. He then creates a figure that portrays for us the nature of the loving heart of God, which goes beyond anything that human fathers are able to do, and certainly what the Middle Eastern world would expect them to do.

Alright, the third point of clarification is where we find that the prodigal has got to sell in a hurry. Jacob had to finish his skullduggery in a hurry. Why? Well he was afraid his brother Esau was going to walk in and ring the bell on him and he would get caught trying to imitate his brother which is what he tries to do so that he can get the majority of the inheritance. The prodigal also has to do it in a hurry because as he goes around the village, selling property, the fight in the family is now known to the community. And to sell your inheritance, in the Middle Eastern world is to deny your genealogy. It is to say, I no longer accept that I am a part of this family. It is very, very serious. And the village is going to say to him, What? You’re selling the orchard your grandfather planted? You’re crazy kid! You’re selling your own soul! Don’t you understand? They slam the door in his face. He will find somebody to buy, probably at a loss. Somebody who doesn’t care what the village says about him, and then he’s got to get out of town, because the anger of the village is getting higher and higher, and it’s about to explode and he’s got to get out of there. So the need to finish the deed with speed also ties our two stories together. The fourth one is not recorded in the story, but it is assumed in the minds of Jesus’ listeners. And that is according to the early Jewish sources which we have in three different places, it refers to the *qetsatsah* ceremony. This ceremony was where if a young man did one of two things: married an immoral woman, or lost the family inheritance among the Gentiles, if he ever dared to come back to the village, the village would get a large earthen ware pot, of the kind that they store drinking water in the house in. They would fill it with burned nuts and burned corn. They would drag the kid to the central square and they would break this pot and the whole village would

cry out “so and so is cut off!”. After that applied in that town no one is going to feed him, or give him drink, or give him shelter, or hire him or have anything to do with him. He’s got to leave town if the *qetsatsah* ceremony is enacted. The prodigal goes into the far country with a little tic tic tic tic in the back of his head that says don’t lose the money among the Gentiles. If you do, you’ve got no way you can go home. If you go home you won’t be able to live in your own village. Jesus manages I find again and again with the briefest of strokes to fill in huge areas of the canvas which is where he is painting the picture which is the parable. He tells us that the boy did lose the money among the Gentiles because he tells us that the boy got a job feeding pigs. Aha! These are not Jews. The minute the audience hears that word pigs we know he’s amongst the Gentiles, and we know when he gets back to the village, the village is going to rough him up. And everybody in that first century audience is aware of this.

And then our final point with this introductory half hour is that we often think that he ends up living an immoral life. Many of our translations have given us clues in that direction. There is a translation called the King James which says he lost the money in riotous living, or there’s the Revised Standard Version which says he did it with loose living, and then there’s the New Revised Standard which says he lost it with descendant living and the New International Version says he lost it with wild living. All of those presuppose that he is messing around with the girls in the far country. His older brother has a few comments to say about this, and I think we’ve picked it up from the older brother who comes in from the field and shouts this at him, and dumped that in to the word which in Greek merely says *asotos* which means “without saving” namely expensive living. It’s important for us to notice that because we’re supposed to spot the fact that older son is exaggerating. And the boy lost the money, yes, but we are not told how he lost the money. We’ve got to keep that cutting edge in the story.

Very well, we’ve launched ourselves into the story, and at which there needs to be greater precision, and in the second lecture we will take a look at those points.