

My name is Dr. Ken Bailey and this is the third of our series of brief lectures on the great parable that Jesus taught which we have traditionally called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I prefer to call it the Parable of the Compassionate Father and his Two Lost Sons. One of the points that we talked about in our last lecture needs to be somewhat expanded here. Remember we talked about the fact that the parable interacts with the story of Jacob. When you look at the story of Jacob, you recall that Jacob has a father and a mother. And the mother in Jacob's story at this point is bad news because she joins with Jacob her younger son to deceive her husband and to deceive her older son, and she's never heard of again until the day she dies. So it's a very sort of sad ending to a beautiful love affair. When Jesus comes to tell his story, which as we mentioned has many points of relationship between the story of Jacob, there's no mother. Why doesn't Jesus have a mother in the story? I think there are a number of very clear reasons. One is the mother figure in the story of Jacob is bad news, he leaves her out. If he includes a mother then Jesus' theology of God has a male and female in it and we're back to the Canaanites with Baal and Astarte, one male and one female God. Jesus doesn't want to do that, and so he has a father who acts with the tender compassion of a mother. Mom is allowed to run down the road and shower the dear boy with kisses, that's okay. Dad is supposed to sit in the house "rumph, rumph, what do you have to say for yourself young man"? And it's okay for Mom to show that extravagant love, Dad is supposed to be the one who cracks the whip. No, that won't do in the theology of Jesus. The one who creates must be the one who redeems. The one who is the Father must be the one who offers the costly love to redeem. So it is a motherly father if you please. It is a father who acts with the love of a mother. Something else, when Jesus creates the story of the good woman and her coin, he takes the female image and elevates it up to a parallel with the other images. God is like a good shepherd, God is like a good woman, and God is like a good father. And if you look at the Psalms and run all the way through the Psalms, you'll ask the question - What are the dominant images for God in the Psalms, and you will find that there is a collection of images that are loud and clear which is God is High Tower, He is strong place, He is the high hill, He is the fortress, He is all of this. And the language is the language of homeland security. We're going to retreat up to the mountaintop, and we're going to be safe up there, and that's okay. But there is a second view in the Psalms. The Psalms talk about in one case God is like a father, in another place it talks about God is like a mother, and then the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm talks about God is like a good shepherd. Jesus has taken that undercurrent in the Psalms, and there are only those three. He has not used the homeland security, but has substituted that undercurrent of the Psalms and has the good shepherd, the good woman and the good father. So the female is elevated up to the top rank of the three major symbols, and it is now a positive symbol, not a negative symbol, which means that the importance of God who is spirit and neither male nor female, yet we male and female are created in the image of God. Thereby we would expect characteristics of both male and female to be a part of the nature of God, and in scripture they are, and in this story they are. That's an important kind of aspect of this story that comes out which holds out with incredible tension and brilliance of the way this story is put together.

Alright, now we are back to talking about the boy and how he responds and what his father does when he sees the son is not now offering how he (the son) is going to solve the problem. We'll look now at scene six on our screen and it says, "And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; and am no more worthy to be called your son.' And (don't read but) And the father said to the servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet'". You notice if you look at the story carefully as we have tried to do that this all happens at the edge of the village. You don't have to transport in your mind, well of course the father's out there all by himself, and then they get home and then we have this order to the servants and they bring the robe and the ring - no. The father is at the edge of the village, half of the village ran after him, the servants from the house also followed their master out there to see if the master wants any kind of help. And you remember in the story of Jacob, his older brother Esau comes out of town with retainers. The retainers are 400 armed men that are out there to beat up on Jacob. The father also has retainers, he meets the wayward son some distance from town. The retainers are not armed soldiers ready to beat up on Jacob, they are the servants ready to serve the master in case the master has some ideas and wants their service. The same theme is borrowed out of the Jacob story and is now transformed in its new use. So the father after seeing that the son totally surrenders his plan to solve the problem by working and paying the money back. And now as we mentioned in our last lecture, the son says I'm unworthy to be called your son. He now means it, the father hears it and agrees. Yes, absolutely you have been unworthy to be called my son since the day you demanded your inheritance, and before that. I'm glad you finally see the point. Having realized that the son has accepted the costly love that is extended to him, this is now Jesus' definition of repentance. That

definition is in the story of the lost sheep, because in the story of the lost sheep Jesus says “even so there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous who need no repentance” (or who think they need no repentance). The “one sinner” who repents in the story is the sheep. What does the sheep do? It gets lost, it rejoices in being found. That’s what happens to the prodigal. The prodigal rejoices and accepts that he should be found by costly love. Then the father orders the banquet. The father says “bring the robe”. They’re going to stand at the edge of the village until the servants bring the robe, and the servants put it on him, they dress him, as it were royalty. Why? The parade back into the town, the boy is going to be wearing the father’s festive garment that he wears only on the 3 festive feast days of the year. When the village sees the boy wearing his father’s festive garment, they will respect the son rather than spitting on him, because of the robes he’s wearing. Knowing the depth of acceptance that the father has extended to him, the community will now for the sake of the father, also accept the boy. Shoes on his feet, slaves don’t wear shoes. And the ring is the word for signet ring which means he now has the authority to sign documents. His father now trusts him. This restoration to son-ship is made at the edge of the village, and now we’ve got this parade back into town. And the father tells the servants, “Kill the fatted calf because we’re going to have a party”. And he says to him, we’ll look now on the screen and see the final scene of our first half of the parable and it reads, “and bring the fatted calf and kill it, let us eat and make merry; for this son was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.” And they began to make merry.” (Luke 15:23) Let’s talk about it. Remember the story began with a death wish? The son himself demonstrated himself to be dead because he is denying his genealogy by demanding his inheritance. He wants his father dead so he can get the property and go off and do with it whatever he likes. At the end of the story we find that the father said “he was dead and is alive, he was lost and is found.” Passive. The Jews said at that period, don’t say the word God - why? You might say it in an improper fashion, then you’ll break the ten commandments. So whenever you can, use a passive to avoid saying the word God. The beatitudes say “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.” Passive. From whom? From God. We might say it “Blessed are the merciful, for God will be merciful to them”. That’s the meaning, but God is not mentioned because of that Jewish custom. These we call divine passives, there are 250 if them in the Gospels, and these are two of those divine passives. What the father really means is “He was dead, and I brought him to life, he was lost and I found him”. If he says he was lost and is found, somebody found him. Well, who’s on stage to find him? The father found him. Where did the father find him? He found him at the edge of the village. Oh, so at the edge of the village he was still lost? You better believe he was. He was so lost he thought he was going to work and pay it back, because he thought the problem was just a broken law. And as we discussed in our last lecture, it isn’t. It’s a broken relationship. So he’s now being restored and the party, from the lips of the father, is in celebration of the success of the father’s costly efforts at winning his son from servant hood back to son-ship. It is not in celebration of the return of the prodigal. The prodigal doesn’t return, he just appears, he comes back. He goes, he comes, he does not return. That theological word does not occur in the story.

Fine, now the first half starting off with a death wish, and an affirmation of his own being dead to his father, wanting his father to drop end, ends with the father saying “he was dead and I have brought him to life, he was lost and is found.” The Coptic translation of the gospel of this text which was made at the end of the fourth century in Egypt puts those passives in to actives and deliberately says in the text, “He was lost and I found him, he was dead and I brought him to life”. And the Arabic versions that are translations of the Coptic preserve that affirmation of the active when the text has a passive.

We turn now to the second half of the story which is the account of the older son. And here we’ll find that there are again four themes which come to a soliloquy, then those themes repeat backwards only the last one is missing. The soliloquy in the middle has the same place, and it is divided into two sections. We’ll look at each little scene by itself. So, on your screen now you can see what the older son does. The text reads, “and as he came and drew near to the house he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the boys and ask what this meant”. (Luke 15:25,26) Fine, what are we talking about here? The older son, who doesn’t have word even that the boy is now back in the house, comes in from the field. In both accounts, the story of Jacob and the story of the Prodigal, somebody starts off in the field and in both cases somebody comes back to the house. That theme Jesus also uses to tie these stories together. The music has already begun. So this means that the paid entertainers have started their act. They haven’t served the meal yet, probably they’re waiting for the older son to show up. So as he goes through the narrow village street, and the streets are about six or seven feet wide, and the houses are about the size of a one car garage. If it’s a

big house it would be the size of a two car garage, and the music involves a drum beat and the drum beat can be heard a quarter of a mile away, and the tune of the drum will tell you whether or not it's a party. So he hears the drum beat - "oh, there's a party somewhere in the village. Oh, that's great"! So he then as he gets closer and closer down the narrow village street to his own family home the noise is getting louder and louder. He enters in to the courtyard of the house, "whoopee, the party's at our house"! And he rushes in to enjoy the party. That's what we expect. No, that's not what happens. What happens is that when he gets to the house he calls one of the "pais". The word "pais" in Greek can mean son, or it can mean servant, or it can mean young boy. The word son doesn't make any sense. Our choices are servant or young boy. Traditionally we've translated it servant. But the servants are all in the house getting ready for the big feast. Young boy is the word that we should use, and young boy is the word that Christians in the Middle East over the last 2000 years have used to translate this word "pais" in this text. They know it's a young boy. Who are these young boys? Well, the elders, the adults, are all in at the banquet ready to have a festive evening, and the little boys, now we're talking about Junior High, they can't go in to the banquet but they can stand outside and they've got sticks and they're dancing to the music, and they're having a good time and stirring up a lot of dust but they're not a part of the banquet inside. So the older son comes to the courtyard and he calls one of these kids and he says "hey kid, what's going on"? Alright now we're going to look at the screen at the next little scene and try and unlock it's secrets. Here you can see it now and its says, "And he said to him, 'Your brother is here, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he received him with peace.' But he was angry and refused to go in. (Luke 15:27,28) What's going on? The little kid says your brother, he doesn't say he returned, he doesn't say he came, he just says he's here. He's present, he "showed up" in colloquial English. This is a rare word and it makes quite clear no one is saying that the prodigal returned, that big theological word with overtones of repentance. He just showed up. So after he showed up then the little boy offers the second explanation as to what's this all about. Keep in mind the village is not happy to see the prodigal. He offended the culture of the village, the honor of the family on a very deep level. Now he comes back in failure, and nobody is going to show up at that banquet to honor the return of the prodigal. They can't stand him. They will show up to honor the father who managed to demonstrate costly love in order to win his son back to himself. Paul uses the same language, not the same language but the same idea. God was - in Christ - reconciling the world unto himself. And that's what's going on in this story. So the little boy says, "Your father has killed the fatted calf because - aha, this is now the second explanation as to what the banquet is all about. He, the father, received the prodigal, and then we get the Greek word "hygiaino". As a Greek word, that has to do with good health and so we've often translated it "safe and sound." But that Greek word for somebody who's first language is Hebrew has a larger meaning. How do we know that? The Jews, in Alexandria, before the time of Jesus translated the Old Testament into Greek. Did they use the word "hygiaino" in their Greek translation? Yes. How many times did it occur? Fourteen times. Is there a single Hebrew word that those translators, Jewish translators, use to translate, that came out "hygiaino"? Yes, there is. And the Hebrew word is "shalom." Seventeen times, when those Jewish translators saw the word "shalom" they translated it "hygiaino." I'm very sure that the word on the lips of Jesus was the word "shalom", "peace." So, what is the young boy telling the older son? He's telling him "your father has made a banquet because the father received your brother "be-shalom", "with peace." Alright, this is very important for us to catch, because if it were a health report, (the banquet is because your brother got back, and he's safe and sound) it would be very churlish of the older son not to enter the banquet because that would mean Dad has not yet decided what he's going to do with junior. The older son would know that after the banquet there's going to be a little family discussion and the older son wants to be there to represent his point of view which is "throw the bum out until he pays!" But if the banquet is in celebration that the father has created shalom, has received the boy not with anger, not with "what did you do with the money?", not with "why did you waste it?", not with "why did you shame us before the village?", but that he has received him with peace, that means that the older son's point of view has already lost. Now we know why he's mad. However, to get mad in this kind of a scene is really serious. Because if he gets mad now, all of the extended family, and all of the most important friends of the extended family are at the banquet. This is like say a younger son in an American family or international family is being married. After the wedding there is a banquet. And at the banquet the older son decides to stand up and have an angry shouting match with his father. Very bad taste! The whole banquet is going to be really upset because they're going to say "if there is a quarrel in this family, fine, settle your problems quietly when there's nobody around." But to do it at a public banquet is really a slap in the face of the father. The older son is offending his father on a deeper level than the younger son. The younger son broke his relationship by asking for his inheritance, the older son broke his relationship by

insulting his father at a big family gathering at that banquet. Now what's going to happen? We look at our text again and we're told. You can see it on the screen, "So his father came out and was entreating him." (Luke 15:28) What does the father do? The father calls a halt on the music and the dancing. He tells the servants, "don't put the food on the table. I'm going to go out and talk to him." We expected the father to ignore him and proceed. Pretend that everything's okay. The father, for the second time in the same day, must take upon himself the form of a suffering servant and go down and out. This is God who comes to us in His divine Word made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, in costly love to win us back in reconciliation to himself. The father has to do it for the younger son. Now he has to do it with the older son. The gaping hole in the story of the good shepherd is now filled. The good shepherd goes after the one sheep that is lost, brings it home to the village, and the good shepherd has the party, but when is going to go bring in the 99? The older son represents the sheep that "don't get lost." Now we find that the story has a completion in that he now goes down and out for the older son. The same act of self-emptying love is required for those who break the law and for those who keep the law. You know, I pay my taxes and I don't beat my wife and I don't kick the dog and everybody thinks I'm a good guy and that's enough. That's fine if you're a servant. If you're a son or a daughter there's a relationship which is broken and which must be repaired. And now the father must offer even more costly love because the insult is fresh and the whole village is watching. So when he goes down and out, how does the older son respond? Is he totally overwhelmed that the father doesn't order some form of punishment but comes himself in self-emptying love to talk to him? No. let's read on the text the two sides, the two sections of his reply. But first let's look at the problem as he sees it. "But he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you and I never disobeyed your commandments, yet you never gave me a kid (a goat) to make merry with my friends.'" (Luke 15:29) Now on the screen you can see the second half of his speech "But when this son of your came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf." (Luke 15:30) The problems, he says, "I don't have as much food as I'd like to have." That's exactly the problem his brother focused on in the far country. And he also says to his father, "I have kept the law. All these years I have served you." And the verb to serve means to serve as a slave. He's defining his relationship to his father as a master and a servant. He doesn't understand the loving relationship of a son who accepts the love of his father and responds to it in a loving fashion. He sees himself as a servant. I offend you in public, and I don't break the rules, so nobody could ask more of me than that. And he accuses him of favoritism. "You give him a calf? You don't even give me a goat! You love him and you don't love me"! "To make merry with **my** friends". He puts himself outside of the family the same way his brother did who denied the genealogy. He says "I am apart from this family. My friends are outside, not inside". And then the second half of the speech he starts to blame his father by saying you killed **for him** the fatted calf was not killed for the prodigal. The little boy says the calf is in celebration of the success of the father's costly efforts in creating peace. The father says the calf is being killed because I have restored my son to life. I have found my lost son. And when he gets both of the boys back together he is going to say to everybody, "Rejoice with me for I have found my son". Why does the average Christian hear the definition of the older son - "you killed for him the fatted calf" and we don't notice that this is exactly opposite of the father's definition of the meaning of the banquet and of the little boy's definition of the meaning of the banquet, and we bought in to this misunderstanding of the meaning of the banquet. It is not for the prodigal. It is for the father! I'll leave you my viewer and friend to answer that question and we will take up the story in our final discussion in the next section.