

My name is Dr. Ken Bailey and we are now on our fourth of our brief lectures on the great parable traditional called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. And we finished our last lecture as we were talking about the banquet and how the fact that the story has three definitions of the banquet. The father defines it as we are rejoicing over the father's success in restoring his boy with peace to the family. The little boy in the courtyard of the house tells the older son the banquet is in celebration of the father's costly efforts at restoring peace. The older son when the father comes down and out to talk to him starts shouting at him, and starts accusing him of favoritism and then he blurts out "you killed for him the fatted calf". If the father had killed the fatted calf to honor the return of the prodigal they would sit alone in the house because no one in the village is going to show up to show any honor to the prodigal because they don't like him. They will honor the father, and for the sake of the father the boy will be wearing the festive robes of his father, and the community will respect him because of the robes he is wearing. So the church across the centuries has heard the older son's definition and ignored the other two. We need to correct that and see that they aren't celebrating the return of the prodigal. The prodigal accepted to be found and surrendered his hope that he might solve the problem when he accepts the love that is extended to him.

Now after the older son shouts at his father is public, accuses his brother of wasting the money on harlots - and peasants from Afghanistan to Spain kill each other over those kind of public accusations. Because after an accusation like that, if he can make it stick, no one is ever going to marry the guy, no family is ever going to give their daughter to this man. And if the older son can make this stick he can then get his brother defined as a rebellious son and the law of Moses says he has to be stoned. And that's also a part of the background of this story. I think he is raging out of control and he's shouting all kinds of irresponsible nonsense. The father has every right and in fact he is expected to put up his hands and say "Enough! I don't have to put up with this! Lock him up! I will deal with him later!" They lock him up in the basement, the father stomps back into the house, he tells everybody let us continue with the banquet, he orders the musicians to start playing and the dancers to start dancing, and there is a grim look on his face but they continue with the banquet. This is not an oriental patriarch. He concludes by pleading for joy. My son was lost and I found him, he was dead and I brought him to life, and you are dead and I am willing to bring you to life, and you are lost and I'm out here trying to find you. That's implied, the second part is implied in what he is saying. The audience now waits expectantly to see how the older son is going to respond. Is he going to accept the costly love offered to him and go into the house and be reconciled to his brother and to his father and to the community, or is he going to remain outside mad? Because grace is not only amazing, for certain types it's infuriating. And he is one of those types. The audience is on the stage. Their understanding of sin is in the story, their understanding of solution to the problem of sin is in the story, and they are represented by the older son, and the father in self-emptying love represents the person of Jesus. And what is the audience going to do with Jesus? And this is the question in this participation theatre that is placed on the heart and in the mind of everyone who reads and perceives the tensions and the beauty and the power of the story.

Fine, we are now ready to try and make a summary. There are voices in the interpretive world for the last 100 years plus that have said every parable has one idea. And so you follow that and you end up with a parable is a delivery system for an idea. So Jesus has an idea, and the idea is like a great big cannon shell, and the parable launches that idea and of course the gunner takes the shell casing and throws it away. He doesn't need it after he get the idea launched. And there's one idea and it goes toward the target. When you look at this story, which one are you going to pick if you go that route? Does it talk about the compassion of the father, it does. Does it talk about the rebellious son, it does. Does it talk about the nature of forgiveness, it does. Does it define sin on a deeper level, it does. Does it talk about joy in restoration, it does. Are you going to pick one of those and ignore the rest? I don't think so. I view the parables of Jesus as a house in which we are invited to take up residence. Jesus creates a new view of the world. When we step into the parable, we step in to that house and we look out on the world from the various windows of the house and we're able to see the world through different eyes. And thereby I think that there are 12 theological themes of this parable. We can also call it the theological cluster. And we want to summarize our study of this parable by going over these 12 very briefly. The first one is the nature of sin. Sin is not what the prodigal does in the far country. Sin is of two types. One is sin by breaking the law and one is a broken relationship while keeping the law. Both sons are sinners. They break their relationship with their father, only in different ways. And the costly love of the father is offered to both of them. It is the father who gets hurt. They have to see that costly love in a demonstration before it gets through to them. And this

is what the cross of Jesus is all about. The broken heart of God becomes visible. Then second the parable talks about freedom. God, the Father, in this parable grants ultimate freedom to these two types of people, namely the freedom to reject love. The deepest pain known to the human spirit is the agony of rejected love, and the most ultimate freedom is the freedom to reject the love that is offered. And that freedom in its ultimate form is extended to both of these boys. The third theme is the theme of repentance. Defined by Jesus in the first story as we've mentioned and now we find that the prodigal gives up his hope to solve the problem when he decides he cannot do it and he accepts the love of his father. That acceptance of that love is Jesus' definition of repentance. The repentance in the far country is repentance before law. The authentic repentance is when the prodigal accepts to be found. The older son is challenged to do the same thing, and the story is left open and the audience is given the chance to join the party by accepting the love that is offered, and that is Jesus' understanding of repentance. Then the third theme in the story is the nature of grace. Grace offered to each of the sons from the beginning of the story to the end. The grace of the father to the younger son when he allows him to take his inheritance and throw it away. The grace that is offered to the younger son when he returns, the grace that is offered to the older son when the father goes out to talk to him, the grace that is extended even after the older son insults his father in public the father is yet again able to transform his anger into grace. Then we find also fatherhood. The image of God as a compassionate father is here given a compassionate father who acts with the tender feelings of a mother is given here its finest expression. No other definition of the understanding of God as Father is allowed to anyone who wants to take the biblical witness and the witness of Jesus seriously. And then seven we find here a definition of sonship. What does it mean for us to be sons and daughters of God. It means he doesn't just give us a set of rules and once he gives us those rules then he's standing there with a whip, if you break them I'm going to clobber you. No, he calls on us to respond as children before a compassionate father. And it's important for us to see this definition of sonship which we have in this story. Then the story also has a clear affirmation as to who the person of Jesus is. How does Jesus understand himself. We noticed in the beginning of our first lecture that the Pharisees are complaining saying this man receives sinners and eats with them. And Jesus does not reply and say well yes gentlemen, occasionally I do but very rarely, and we always clean them up first and we always close the blinds and we keep the numbers down, and the God of the Old Testament is a God of judgment yes but he is also a God of mercy so we've got to leave a crack of the door open just a wee bit. He doesn't say that. He says gentlemen you are dead right, I do sit down and eat with sinners, but it's much worse than you imagine. I sit down and eat with sinners, but I run down the road and I shower them with kisses and I drag them in that I might be able to sit down and eat with them. Jesus is taking the symbol of Father and reusing it to define himself. Not that he is the father in the house which is the symbol of God, but that God becomes a suffering servant, takes upon himself the form of a servant to offer costly love to his children. Thereby it is God who comes to us incarnate, in his Word, in the person of Jesus. And that is what we see Jesus defining here. What happens is the third story mirrors also what happens in the first story. When Jesus tells the story of the good shepherd and defines himself as the good shepherd, the audience knows that behind Jesus' telling of that story is the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm which says the Lord is my shepherd. Jeremiah in the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Jeremiah retells the story and in that God says I myself will come and round up the lost of Israel. And Ezekiel has an entire chapter, chapter 34 in which he retells Psalm 23, only it takes him 31 verses to do it. And God says I, I myself one day am going to come and round up the lost sheep. When Jesus tells the story of the lost sheep, he is saying why do I, Jesus, go after lost sinners? I am fulfilling this classical promise of God that one day He would come Himself and round up the lost sheep. Jesus defines himself as the Good Shepherd, he defines himself as the Good Woman, and he defines himself as the Good Father. The story is surrounded, it is infused with Jesus telling us who He is. Then we notice also about family and community. There are 7 different collections of images in the New Testament that talk about the nature of the community Jesus founded which is the church. Sometimes they are political, some of them have to do with nature, some of them have to do with cosmic images. The one that Jesus chooses is that of a family, and we have it here in this story. That's why the early church called one another brother and sister. They saw themselves as a single family. And also, Jesus had women disciples because he in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew gestures to his disciples and says here is my mother and my father and my sisters and my brothers. There isn't any place in the world you can gesture to a group of men and say here's my mother and my sister. When he does that he is gesturing to a room full of people who are both male and female. Jesus shapes his parables to ring the big bells for his men and for his women listeners. So amongst his disciples are his men and his women. They are a part of this family and a part of this ministry. When Jesus talks about the church he uses the language of the family. His primary image for the new community that he creates. Did you ever worry about how, perhaps

you didn't because you didn't notice about the women disciples, but in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, Luke tells us that Jesus was traveling with the 12 going from village to village with some women, and their names are mentioned. So here they are sleeping night after night in various villages, and how did he get away with this? Very simple answer. He told everybody we're all relatives. And the community says oh okay, you're all family, okay, fine. That's now okay. If you're not of the same family, its not okay, then and now. They saw this community interacting and using the language of a family, and they accepted that this has become a new family. The family is Jesus' primary image for the church. And then number 10 we notice incarnation and atonement. We notice Jesus taking upon himself the form of a servant, that's Christmas, God comes to us in a person, and we find him in costly love restoring his son's to himself and that's Easter and we call it atonement. The two are back to back, they are a single coin, you get one of them you are going to get the other. His name shall be called Emmanuel, God with us, that's Christmas. And we will call him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins, because the word Jesus, the root of the word is to save. He is with us and he saves. Christmas and Easter. One of them happens in Bethlehem and one of the happens in Jerusalem and they are only 7 miles apart. And in this story the 2 are the 2 sides of a single coin. And then we find also the overtones of the Lord's Supper. When the children are restored to their family there is now a party in celebration. The Eucharist, the Last Supper, the Lord's Supper which he instituted the night before his death. The many scenes, particularly in the gospel of Luke where Jesus sits down and has meals with his disciples. And so the Eucharist, or the celebration of the Lord's Supper is a continuation of the quality of fellowship that was available to the disciples when they sat down and ate with him. Not only does Jesus do that in real life, but he creates the same scene in the parable, this parable in particular where there are people who sit down and have a meal together. The Eucharist looks to the past, to what happened the night before Jesus died, it is celebrated in the present because we participate in that banquet, and it looks forward to the end of times when the Messiah will sit down with all those who have called upon His name. And finally there is eschatology. The story does look to the future because this celebration is a celebration of a banquet which ends with the end of history. And so we have here in this fantastic parable the finest summary of the teachings and message of Jesus that is available anywhere. It is not different from what Paul teaches. Paul takes this theology, puts it into conceptual language for a Greco-Roman world that thinks in conceptual language rather than picture language. There is none of this Jesus is a simple rabbi who is teaching simple stories to simple people, along comes Paul and he dreams up all this wonderful theology that is the foundation of the church. Or if you like it you can say he came up with things you never thought of and were quite horrified by and there is a split between the teaching and life of Jesus and the teaching and witness of Paul. No, one is a glove and it fits on a hand. The hand is the teaching of Jesus, and the glove is the conceptualization of that story as we find it in the teachings of Paul/ And so in this famous story, I urge you to take this story seriously and think deeply as I have been privileged to do to try and understand what it means when we see it, and see Jesus not as just a simple man, but as a theologian offering to the community a way to honor their past in the story of Jacob and to reshape that into a higher level of the perception of the human predicament and how that human predicament can be solved.

I've created a little parable if you please. It's got faults in it, and I've had people point out those faults, and I know them, but I'm going to tell it to you hoping that it might be helpful. Imagine now a mother who is going to have a tea party with some of her friends, and she's got two sons, and one of them is Johnny and he's about 5 and the other is Billy and he is about 10. And Billy is in the next room doing his homework. And so Mom is getting ready for the tea party and she's got the dining room and kitchen are together and she puts a tablecloth over the table and takes a glass pitcher of lemonade and puts it on the tablecloth and she is going to get out some cookies and get the coffee ready. And she tells Johnny, Johnny please don't pull on the tablecloth. If you do the pitcher of lemonade's going to come down on your head. She turns here back, guess what, Johnny turns and pulls the tablecloth and starts pulling. Mom turns around and sees the pitcher of lemonade just about to come down on Johnny's head. Now the parable's got three endings. First ending - she rushes over and says Johnny, I told you not to pull on the tablecloth, and she dumps the pitcher of lemonade on his head. This is the definition of God is a law-giver, He gives the law to humankind and we're warned if we break it we're going to get in trouble. We break it and we're punished. I don't find that in scripture. The second ending is Mom picks up the pitcher of lemonade and she says Johnny, I told you not what to do, and you still did it so I should dump this on you but it I do you'll probably catch your death of cold. She calls Billy in and she dumps it on Billy, and she tells Johnny, see what you made me do? And Johnny breaks out feeling guilty and starts crying. This could be called divine child abuse. Why are you beating up on the wrong kid? Why aren't you beating up on this one, not that

one? What's Billy have to do with it? And that's not appropriate, the understanding of the solution to the human predicament the New Testament gives us. Third ending to the parable is Mom sees the pitcher of lemonade about to come down on Johnny's head, she rushes out, she knocks the pitcher aside. The pitcher breaks. She sustains a deep cut on her arm, starts to bleed profusely, pulls the towel off her shoulder, begins to wrap up the wound and Johnny sees Mom getting hurt for him and realizes if Mom hadn't come over and gotten hurt, that pitcher of lemonade would have fallen down on him and he would have gotten hurt because of the pitcher. And now he needs to be comforted, and Mom picks him up and starts to comfort him. It is Mom who got hurt not Billy. There is a unity between Mom who told Johnny, by the nature of tablecloths and the nature of pitchers of lemonade and gravity and all that good stuff, if you break these rules you are going to get hurt. Not because I arbitrarily tell you to stand on your head in a corner. I'm telling you your fully life will require you to learn how to live in a way that you live in harmony with the people around you and the world around you, and if you break those rules and you go on drugs you are going to fry your brains. The judgment comes out of the nature of who we are, the nature of the community and the nature of the world around us. God said that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us, and Paul also said that God was, in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself. Mom took upon herself a form in which her suffering is visible in order to protect Johnny from getting hurt. Mom did have a quick flash of anger to begin with. She looked over and she said, oh if he had just listened to me we wouldn't have this problem. But like the father who is in the story of the prodigal son, Mom manages to transform that deep disappointment in to an action that is costly and that lets Johnny understand that what Mom tells him is for his own best interest and the interest of the harmony of the family. Yes, Christ died FOR our sins, and we start thinking in terms of well I paid \$20,000 for the car, so Jesus has to suffer because I have caused so much sin. That's not an adequate correlation. This is not a mathematical formula. We are talking about God in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. The Father in the form of a suffering servant reconciles his boys to himself. Mom, in the form of someone willing to demonstrate costly love reconciles Johnny back to herself. And this is the story of the Gospel and it's the heart of everything Jesus did and everything that He taught us. My prayer is that this story may enrich you and your life the way it has enriched me and mine.