

**Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> March 2021**  
**Glynde Lutheran Church**  
**Sermon on Luke 15:11 – 24**  
**Theme: “The shocking behaviour of God”**  
**“..that He doesn’t ‘zap’ us as we deserve”**

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***Introduction:***

Today, more and more people realise the importance of looking at the Biblical accounts not with Western eyes but rather with Middle-Eastern eyes. It is important to realise that the New Testament documents were written by people who lived in a particular region with its own particular culture; if we forget this and look at the New Testament accounts and stories with "Western eyes", then we are likely to miss important points or jump to wrong conclusions.

Let me give you an example, *admittedly one that I've shared with you before*. Luke tells us that Mary, Jesus' mother, laid the baby Jesus "in a Manger" (*Luke 2:7*). If we look at this through Western eyes, we would immediately jump to the conclusion: "Aha! Jesus was born in a stable! Because where are mangers? In stables, of course!"

But this is almost certainly not right!! In the Middle-East, mangers are most often located in the house itself. A typical villager's home from the time of Jesus' birth even right down until this century is one room made up of two levels: a raised level where the family lives and a lower level at one end where the donkey and cow are brought at night. Mangers are built into the end of the raised level nearest the animals so that the animals can reach over and feed at night when they're hungry (*K. Bailey, Through Peasant Eyes, xv-xvi & article "Manger & Inn"*).

So it seems very probable that Jesus was born in a private home, and not in a stable out the back as countless nativity plays have assumed right down through the ages (*cf. "inn" should probably be translated "guest room"; Luke 2:11*).

However, all this is beside the point. The point is: if we look at the New Testament accounts and stories with Western glasses on rather than Middle-Eastern ones, then we are likely to miss important points or jump to wrong — conclusions. One man who has stressed this in his writings over and over again is a man named Kenneth Bailey. He was the professor of New Testament studies at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, Lebanon.

Kenneth Bailey has talked endlessly with pastors, elders, farmers and others throughout the Middle-East, *in Jordan, Israel, & Egypt* about the New Testament accounts and has gained many new insights with regard to them.

Before we look at this parable of Jesus' in depth, though, I think that it is important that we realise why Jesus spoke it in the first place. Luke at the start of chapter 15 of his Gospel writes:

**One day when many tax collectors and other outcasts, *lit.* “sinners”, came to listen to Jesus, the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law started grumbling, “This man welcomes outcasts and even eats with them!” (Luke 15:1-2).**

So Jesus told them this parable, *well, in actual fact, Luke gives us three parables that Jesus spoke in response to the grumbling of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law: the parables of the lost sheep; lost coin; and the lost son, which is our focus today.*

It seems that the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law didn't think that God was big enough to accept tax-collectors, prostitutes, and other sinners into his Kingdom (*cf. J.B. Phillip's book, Your God is Too Small*).

Their vision of God was a very small one: that God only loves those who attempt to do his will, and that there was no way that he would have anything to do with those who flagrantly broke his Law. So they were sorely offended when Jesus who claimed to be a man of God actually associated with and even ate with such people.

Let's look now at our focus for today, the third of the three parables that Jesus told in response to the grumbling of the Pharisees and the

teachers of the Law: the parable of the Lost Son, well *“the parable of the lost sons”*, but we are going to focus this morning on the first half of what Jesus says.

### 1) *The Death Wish (Luke 15:11-12)*

Jesus begins this parable by introducing the characters in the parable: a father and his two sons. Jesus goes on to say that one day the younger son went to his father and said, **"Father, give me my share of the property now"**.

To us, at first sight, this seems like a fairly reasonable request. Here is a youngster who wants his share of the property so that he can go out into the world and make his mark in the world.

But let's listen to what Kenneth Bailey has to say. He writes:  
**"For over 15 years I have been asking people of all walks of life from Morocco to India and from Turkey to the Sudan about the implications of a son's request for his inheritance while the father is still living. The answer has almost always been emphatic the same...."**

**The conversation runs as follows:**

**'Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?'**

**'Never!!'**

**'Could anyone ever make such a request?'**

**'Impossible!'**

**'If anyone ever did, what would happen?'**

**'His father would beat him, of course!'**

**'Why?!'**

**'This request means—he wants his father to die!'"** (*Bailey, Poet & Peasant, 161-162*).

But does the father in Jesus' story beat the younger son for in effect wishing that he, *the father*, was dead? No! Wonder of wonders, the father grants the son's insulting request and divides his property and assets then and there between his two sons.

2) *The Face-Saving Plan (Luke 15:13-20a)* And what does the younger son do!?

As quickly as he can, he turns his share of the family property into cash (*His share is "one third", cf. Deut. 21:17*). As Bailey points out, he wouldn't have done this quickly just out of a concern to "get on with it'. But rather it would have been because of increasing community disgust and even hatred. As the village community gradually learnt about what the son was doing, feelings of disgust and resentment would have built up in them. Here was a young man who was turning his back on his family, and to 'top it off' was taking a valuable share of the village's wealth away from the village to spend it elsewhere (*Bailey, 179*).

Well, what happened to this young man? Jesus says:

**He went to a country far away, where he wasted his money in reckless living. <sup>14</sup> He spent everything he had. Then a severe famine spread over that country, and he was left without a thing. <sup>15</sup> So he went to work for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him out to his farm to take care of the pigs. <sup>16</sup> He wished he could fill himself with the bean pods the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything to eat.**

Eventually, Jesus says, the young man "came to his senses" and hit upon a face-saving plan. He would go home and ask his father for a job on the family property as a hired hand. That way he would at least have some-thing to eat, he would be a free man, *not a slave*, and in time he would be able to repay his father the money that he had wasted.

How does Jesus put it in his parable:

**<sup>17</sup> At last he came to his senses and said, 'All my father's hired workers have more than they can eat, and here I am about to starve! <sup>18</sup> I will get up and go to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against God and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers.'" <sup>20</sup> So he got up and started back to his father.**

Of course, he knew that it wouldn't be easy!

He knew that he would have to 'put up with' abuse from the people in his local community as he made his way home. He knew that when people learnt that he was returning home penniless, they would quickly gather to vent their anger at him. Furthermore, he knew that his father would make him wait for days before receiving him, and he knew that at the very least he would be given a severe beating from his father before he was accepted by him as one of his hired workers. But at least at the end of it all, he wouldn't be hungry, and he would have some standing in the community (*Bailey, 173-181*).

### 3) *The Father's Response (Luke 15:20b-24)*

However, things don't work out as the young man thinks. To his utter amazement as he approaches his home village, he sees his father racing towards him to welcome him home.

Luke tells us that Jesus said:

**"The son was still a long way from home when his father saw him; his heart was fill with pity, and he ran, threw his arms round his son, and kissed him again and again"** (*Luke 15:20b*).

The loving father acts to protect his son from the scorn and the ridicule of the villagers.

To do this, he had to do something that is considered extremely shameful and humiliating in the Middle-East: he ran!! Kenneth Bailey points out that no man of mature age in the Middle-East runs anywhere. He "always walks in a slow dignified fashion". To run, a man must take up the front edge of his long flowing robes in his hands and in so doing expose his undergarments. All this is extremely shameful and humiliating for a man.

But this is what the loving father in Jesus' parable does to protect his son from the verbal and physical abuse of the villagers. Out of love for his son, he "takes upon himself the shame and humiliation due" his son (*Bailey, The Cross and the Prodigal, 55; see also Appendix One*).

Jesus says that the father hugged his son and kissed him repeatedly. By doing this, the father demonstrates his acceptance of his returning son despite what he son has done.

In the Middle-East, a kiss is "a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness". When a serious quarrel takes place in a Middle-Eastern village, part of the ceremony enacted to show that reconciliation and forgiveness has taken place is a public kiss by the leading men involved. Remember the story of Jacob's meeting with his brother Esau whom he had wronged! Esau threw his arms around him and kissed his as a public sign to all and sundry that he forgave him (*Gen. 33:4; Bailey, Poet, 182, footnote 185*).

The son, Jesus says, in response to his father's demonstration of love for him can only speak part of his prepared speech. He says: **"Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit, *lit.* "worthy", to be called your son" (15:21).**

He leaves out the words:

**"Treat, or *Lit.* "make", me as one of your hired workers".**

Why? People traditionally have explained this by saying that the father interrupted him before he could finish his planned speech. I'll read to you, though, what Kenneth Bailey has to say about this. Bailey writes:

**"I think not. Faced with this incredible event that he could never have predicted, he is flooded with the awareness that his real sin is not the lost money but rather the wounding of his father's heart".**

**He no longer "presumes to offer any solution to their estrangement.... He is overwhelmed and can only put himself completely at the mercy of his father and say, 'I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'" (*Bailey, Cross, 58*).**

In other words, Bailey is saying that it is only when the son is face to face with the father's demonstration of love for him that he truly repents of all that he has done to hurt his father.

Jesus finishes the first half of his parable by saying:

**<sup>22</sup> But the father called to his servants. ‘Hurry!’ he said. ‘Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Then go and get the prize calf and kill it, and let us celebrate with a feast! <sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.’ And so the feasting began (15:22-24).**

I could go on and talk about the meaning and the significance of the robe, the ring, and the shoes and so on, but I won't. Suffice it to say : that they are expressions of the fact that the father in Jesus' story accepts the son back and gives him the full rights and privileges of a son (see *Appendix Two*).

### ***Conclusion:***

Let's sum up it all up. Here in this parable that Jesus told, Jesus gives his listeners and us today a remarkable picture of God's love for us. Behind the father in today's text, Jesus wants us to see God (*cf. Isa. 63:16*).

The Pharisees and the teachers of the Law had a small picture of God: they saw him as a person who loves only those who attempt to do his will. But Jesus here paints a much, much bigger picture of God. God, Jesus says, is a God whose heart overflows with love for all those whom he has created, no matter how far they have wandered from him. He is a God who is even prepared to suffer, shame and humiliation in order to demonstrate to his love for us *and to rescue us from our lost condition (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4)*.

That is the God we have, the God that is. He is a God of love, a God who in the person of Jesus was prepared to suffer even the shame and the humiliation of the cross for us in order to demonstrate his love for us and make it possible for us to return to his family.

As you go through the up's and down's of life, never ever forget this parable that Jesus told.

No matter what happens in life, always remember that you are loved by God, *our dear Father*, and that nothing that you ever do can separate you from His love for you (*cf. Romans 8:38-39*).

## *Addenda*

- 1) Bailey talks about “the cost of restoration”, a cost that points to the cost involved in restoring us to God’s family. Listen again to what he says in connection with the parables of the lost sheep: **If *the sheep* is not found and carried back, it will die. The sacrificial action of the shepherd *alone* saves the life of the sheep. The theme of the price paid for salvation is deep imbedded in each of the three stories under consideration. The understanding of the atonement here set forth may be as significant as is found anywhere in the NT (*Finding the Lost*, p. 75).**

**After steeling his nerves for the harsh treatment he now awaits him in the village, suddenly the son sees his father *running the gauntlet for him!* ...The father offers a costly demonstration of unexpected love...**

**Here the father has...taken on the form of a suffering servant as he endures the humiliation of running in public through the streets.... I am convinced that at this point Jesus is talking about himself and about the meaning of his suffering (*Ibid.*, p. 147-148).**

- 2) Bailey adds these insights:  
**The best robe is certainly the father’s.... The “first” or best robe would be the robe the father wore on feast days and other grand occasions.... The father’s robe will assure assure acceptance by the community (p. 185).**

**The ring is quite likely a signet ring, which means he is trusted in a remarkable way. The shoes are a sign of him being a free man in the house, not a servant.... The purpose of the banquet *of the fatted calf* includes a desire to reconcile the boy to the whole community (p.185, 187).**