

**TANGAZA UNIVERSITY COLLEGE  
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**“MY DEAD SON”: GOD’S COMPASSION,  
ACCORDING TO LUKE 15:11-32 AND ITS  
APPLICATION TO CHRISTIANS TODAY**

Supervisor

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Master of Arts in Theology

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## **DEDICATION**

To my family, friends and loved ones, and to all in need of love

## **EPIGRAPH**

God is helplessly in love with us, what a beauty!

His identity, if we are to give him one, is that of compassionate love. — Rev. Dr. E.  
Mulchay

In fact, God is running after us, in search of our relationship.

God is in perfect solidarity with humanity. Cf. Heb 2:17

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

My heartfelt gratitude goes first to the Lord and giver of life, who has given me this precious life. Indeed, I am grateful to Almighty God. Even before I was formed in my mother's womb, you knew me, and you consecrate me a prophet to the nations (Jer. 1:5-6). Thanks to the Triune God for the inspiration and guidance into the mystery of God's love for humanity. Furthermore, my special gratitude to my erudite and cheerful supervisor, Rev. Dr. Anthonio Magnante. I sincerely appreciate his critical mind, corrections, guidance, and approach to my thesis. 'Anthonio' as he is preferred to be called, you are indeed a blessing to the Church and humanity.

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## **STUDENT'S DECLARATION**

I, the undersigned, declare that this thesis is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflection. It is submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Master of Arts in Theology. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

### Old Testament

Gen	Genesis
Exod	Exodus
Num	Numbers
Deut	Deuteronomy
1Sam	1 Samuel
Ezek	Ezekiel
Ps(s)	Psalms(s)
Prov	Proverbs
Hos	Hosea
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Sir	Sirach
Dan	Daniel
Macc	Maccabees

### New Testament

Matt	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
Acts	Acts of the Apostles
Heb	Hebrews

### Others

Cf.	Confer/Compare
i.e.,	Id Est/ That is to say
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
V./ vv.	Verse/ Verses
ed.	edited by
al	alii — other persons
DM	“Dives in Misericordia”
GFM	God, the Father of Mercy

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## **GENERAL INTRODUCTION**

### **Aim and purpose of study**

Luke's Jesus is full of compassion and tender-loving kindness, always having concern for the poor, orphan, sinners and the outcasts. He is full of sensitivity. God is compassion and love. However, where is the compassion in our communities, homes, politics, schools, legal system, traditions and many others?

Luke was not only trying to demonstrate Jesus' messiahship; he was also trying to capture the character and attitude of Jesus so that the reader could come to believe in him. The evangelist, therefore, showed that Jesus associated himself with all kinds of people, rich and poor, socially accepted people and socially outcasts, religious people and sinners. It is evident that Luke's Jesus, however, favours the poor and those people on the fringes of the society. There is no doubt that, this characteristic of Jesus gives hope, reassurance and life to the down trodden, those who have useless their lives, to those who feel that they have lost contact with society, to those who are racked by guilt, and useful to all Christians in general.

If we are truly images of God, there is need for us to change our thoughts. I think that compassion does not necessarily need rationalization. It is a call, a vocation to all.

### **Interest and motivation of the study**

I am a witness to the compassionate nature of God. Hence, it is a *conditio sine qua non* that I share my experience of God's love to my readers and the next generation, taking into consideration, what previously has been said by others. Therefore, as God has loved us, we, too, ought to love others.

Jesus comes with this radically new Good News that *'abbā* is the God of inclusive, indiscriminate, gratuitous, unconditional love offering a warm invitation to the banquet. His message is that God is in love with us, he has fallen in love with humanity in an unrestricted fashion without limits or qualifications or conditions or reservations. God unconditionally accepts us! However, we have to answer with an attitude of and trust.

More so, Jesus admonishes his disciples not to strive after greatness based on rank or position. He prefers that they be people capable of love. He intimates that true greatness accrues from being able to recognize the worth and importance of those members of the society frequently considered to be the least important.

### **Structure of the study**

In this essay, our concern is the parable of the compassionate father, found in Luke 15: 11-32. We have just said that Jesus wanted his disciples to be people capable of love, he was teaching them about the unconditional love of God, thus to concretize his teaching and attitude towards the down trodden, he tells them and the Pharisees who oppose his way of life the parable of the compassionate father.

This paper shall consist of four chapters. In the first chapter, we shall consider the introduction to the chapter, after which we discuss the meaning of the parable, the remote and immediate contexts. We then discuss the criticisms and the structure of the parable in view.

In the second chapter, we shall consider the analysis of some theological statements of the parable with reference to Luke's community. We shall then briefly give the theological importance of the parable.

In the third chapter, we examine compassion from the theological and scriptural points. After the synopsis of love, we shall consider compassion from the Old Testament and New Testament writings.

Finally, the fourth chapter deals with our attitude towards compassion. We have an indispensable obligation to show love to all. This will swing from human experience of compassion to solidarity and compassion, socio-politics, leadership and discipleship, law, and finally the eschatological dimension to compassion.

# CHAPTER I

## EXEGESIS OF LUKE 15: 11-32

### 1.0 Introduction

In this chapter, we shall describe the meaning of parables and their literary form. We shall then examine the text of Luke 15: 11-32 in order to establish its remote and immediate context. Once the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem* of the passage have been properly established we shall consider critical approach to the parable including, textual criticism, redaction-historical criticisms and form criticism. We shall also give a succinct presentation of the structure and structural parallelism found.

To some readers familiar with the parable of the prodigal son, it appears unjust and a downright scandal. The person who might be called the 'good' son stays with and cares for his father, works hard and refrains from frivolous spending of money. By contrast, the bad son leaves his father's home, enjoys his life, however he deems fit, works little and wastes the money given to him by his father.<sup>1</sup>

It is important for us to consider the introductory statement, which alerts the reader to the double plot line: "there was a man who had two sons." According to the laws of the Roman Empire, the two sons would have been able to live off the family estate during their father's lifetime, but the property would have remained in the father's hands until his death. After his death, the older son would inherit two-thirds of the property, and the remaining third would be divided among the remaining heirs. The younger son's request to receive his property during his father's

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. S. ROTHLIN AND S. FREY, *The Parable of the Prodigal Son and Modern Motivation Theory*, 7.

lifetime was thus very irregular and deeply disrespectful. It amounted to treating his father as if he were dead.<sup>2</sup>

Standard economists would agree with the first son's, or rather the 'good' son's anger. They would base their analysis on the behavioural assumptions of neo-classical economics, according to which every individual pursues his or her self-interest. Hence, they would immediately point out that the father's forgiving behaviour is likely to lead to an unstable outcome. They would argue that it gives every son an incentive first to enjoy life to the fullest and only return later to his father assured that he will forgive him. Taken to its logical conclusion, it might seem to imply that there is no need to work or avoid wasting money.<sup>3</sup>

To sum up this introduction, the parable of the prodigal son, — (or rather the story of a compassionate father, as recent scholars tends to call the parable), is one of the world's best-loved stories. It is longer and more complex than the two preceding parables (the lost sheep, [15:3-7] and the lost coin [15:8-10]), and it has a wider application. The complete parable includes verses 11-32. This parable, as we know, is found only in Luke's Gospel.<sup>4</sup>

## 2.0 The Meaning of the Parable

The word “parable – *mashal* in Hebrew, and *παραβολή* in Greek— had a wide range of meanings both in the Scriptures and in classical literature.”<sup>5</sup> We would be guilty of the sin of anachronism if we used the word 'parable' today as it was used in antiquity.<sup>6</sup> In antiquity, parable has no fixed or precise definition

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. S. RINGE, *Luke*, 207.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. S. ROTHLIN AND S. FREY, *The Parable of the Prodigal Son and Modern Motivation Theory*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. C.L. CHIDERS, *Beacon Bible Commentary*, 557.

<sup>5</sup> J.D. CROSSAN, *In Parables*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. M.I. BOUCHER, *The Parables*, 13.

because it could refer to a wide variety of literary products. Hence, for the ancient, it referred to language that was somehow striking or out of the ordinary. Boucher says that, *παραβολή* refers to the Gospel stories used by Jesus. Thus, he expressed parable as a story. This story conveys a lesson, so that the parable has a double meaning, the story and the lesson. Its purpose is to effect a change in the hearer, to lead to a decision or an action; and the lesson is always religious or moral.<sup>7</sup> Other authors define parable as a metaphor or similes drawn from nature or common life. Still others call it a narrative or story arresting or captivating the hearers by its vividness and, strangeness and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.<sup>8</sup> “Parable can also be seen as a narrative which functions as religious or ethical rhetorical speech.”<sup>9</sup> The parable in consideration here is that of love, forgiveness, and joy. We shall call it the parable of the compassionate father.<sup>10</sup>

This parable is extraordinary in its composition. “It develops its plot in an economy of words, using only the necessary characters, with no more than two on stage at one time, and arriving at a solution that requires the reader's consent to be satisfactory.”<sup>11</sup> The focus of this parable is the father: “there was a man who had two sons,” but it is most often called the parable of the prodigal son. Nevertheless, we must make it clear that this is not a parable of the younger son or a parable of an

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<sup>7</sup> Cf., M.I. BOUCHER, *The Parables*, 14-17.

<sup>8</sup> Cf., C.H. DODD, *The Parable of the Kingdom*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> M.I. BOUCHER, *The Parables*, 39.

<sup>10</sup> Cf., J. JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 101.

<sup>11</sup> F.B. CRADDOCK, *Luke, Interpretation*, 186.

older son, but a parable of a father.<sup>12</sup> The parable begins with the father and ends with him.<sup>13</sup>

This parable plays upon the hearer's knowledge of other biblical stories, in which the younger brother triumphs over the older brother's. Examples include Esau and Jacob (Gen 25: 27-34; 27:1-36); as well as Joseph and his brothers (Gen 37: 1-4). Jesus doubly reverses expectations: the prodigal son is a parody of the successful younger brother; the elder son is not vanquished, but invited to the feast.<sup>14</sup>

### **3.0 Luke 15: 11-32**

*<sup>11</sup>Then he said, "there was a man who had two sons; <sup>12</sup>and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that falls to me'. And he divided his living between them. <sup>13</sup>Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. <sup>14</sup>And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. <sup>15</sup>So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. <sup>16</sup>And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup>But when he came to himself he said, ' How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! <sup>18</sup>I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'" <sup>20</sup>And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and*

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. F.B. CRADDOCK, *Luke, Interpretation*, 187.

<sup>13</sup> E. SCHWEIZER, *The Goodnews according to Luke*, 247.

<sup>14</sup> R.J. KARIS, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 707.

<sup>15</sup> The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version.



embraced him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup>And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son'. <sup>22</sup>But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; <sup>23</sup>and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; <sup>24</sup>for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

<sup>25</sup>Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. <sup>27</sup>And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' <sup>28</sup>But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, <sup>29</sup>But he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!' <sup>31</sup>And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup>It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

#### **4.0 The Delimitation of the Text**

Thematically, the three parables in chapter 15 focus on the joy that accompanies or should accompany the finding of what has been lost, and this theme is articulated in parallel stories concerning a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son.<sup>16</sup> Karis puts this succinctly when he writes that one feature of Luke's creativity is to combine the three, once independent parables into his unit of teaching. He suggests

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. E. LAVERDIERE, *Luke*, 201

that Luke had some prior help as the traditional refrain of “rejoice, lost, found” in verses 6,9,24, and 32 intimates: “Rejoice with me, I have found my sheep that was lost” (15:6). “Rejoice with me, I have found the drachma I lost” (15:9). “We are going to have a feast, a celebration, because this son of mine was dead [my dead son] and has come back to life, he was lost and is found” (15:23-24). “But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found” (15:32). Thus, this refrain clearly links the three parables together.<sup>17</sup>

This parable (Luke 15:11-32) is known as the parable of the Prodigal Son. In it, the character of God — his love and mercy — and the mission of Jesus are all-embracing both the self-righteous and sinners. In this parable, Jesus presents the forgiving love and mercy of God to a sinner who turns back to him. The parable invites the Lukan audience to have the same attitude of celebrating and rejoicing in love for the sinner who returns back to God’s fold.<sup>18</sup>

Luke gives us a picture of banquet feast in chapter 14:1-24. This banquet feast in 14:1-24 foreshadows the setting of meal sharing which is resumed in chapter 15:1-2. After Luke 14, the introduction of Luke 15:1-2 describes a new situation: Jesus addresses a parable not to the crowds, which were the last interlocutors mentioned in Luke 14:25; nor to the disciples, the next hearers in Luke 16:1, but to the murmuring Pharisees and scribes.<sup>19</sup> Luke 15 occurs approximately in the middle of the Travel Narrative (Luke 9:51-19:44). It consists of three parables which are seen as a trilogy. These three parables speak of the joy of finding that which was lost

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. R.J. KARRIS, *Invitation to Luke*, 185.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. R.C. TANNEHILL, *Luke*, 239.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. H. HERMAN, *The Third Gospel for the Third World*, 95.

and as a result, there was a cause for celebration, a banquet. The three parables correspond in a way to Jeremiah 31:10-14; 15-16; 17-20, though it is probably accidental.<sup>20</sup>

Luke 15:4-10 contain two parables which precede the third one in vv. 11-32. These two parables are parallel parables which aimed at those who murmur at Jesus' reception of the tax collectors and sinners (v 1-2).<sup>21</sup> These first two parables are "similar in length, form, content, and closing comment that they can be treated together fairly."<sup>22</sup> These parables, i.e., the parable of the Lost Sheep (vv.3-7) and the parable of the Lost Coin (vv.8-10), built towards the long parable of the Prodigal Son (vv.11-32).<sup>23</sup> However, much as these two parables are particularly close in structure, all three share a common progression, moving from what a main character "has" to its loss, recovery and restoration, and the celebration that ensues from it.<sup>24</sup>

Vv. 11-32 constitute the third parable, which emphasizes the character of the Prodigal Son whose behaviour and fate draw our attention. There are two sons whose stories unfold in this parable and a father whose love and generosity encompasses both. As said earlier, some people posit that a better title for this parable would have been "the parable of Two Beloved Sons" or "the parable of the

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. E. SCHWEIZER, *The Good News According to Luke*, 244; In Jeremiah 31:10-14 there is a figure of the shepherd and flock which corresponds to the Parable of the Lost Sheep. God is seen as the shepherd restoring the nation of Israel (sheep) which has gone astray from his covenant. As the nation of Israel went away from God and was chastised; God nevertheless was also responsible in bringing them back to his sheepfold. Jeremiah 31:15-16 pictures Rachel at Ramah (Rachel corresponds to the woman in search of her Lost Coin) weeping dreary for her lost children taken into exile. Jeremiah 31:17-20 shows the Prodigal Ephraim (just like the prodigal son) in his waywardness and his return in sorrow for his sins, asking God for pardon and restoration. In all these correspondence, there is redemption of what was sort for and there restoration. Cf. C.H. FEINBERG, "Jeremiah," 568-570.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. E. SCHWEIZER, *The Goodnews according to Luke*, 243.

<sup>22</sup> F. B. CRADDOCK, *Luke*, 183.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. D. J. HARRINGTON, *The Gospel of Luke*, 240.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. J. B. GREEN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 568.

Compassionate Father.” This is because the characters come into focus at different points in the narrative.<sup>25</sup> Verse 11 (“*And he said, a man had two sons*”) serves as an introduction to the parable. The opening statement prepares Jesus’ audience in expectation of the role the two sons will play in the parable. This statement develops through two scenes, one featuring each of the two sons. Each of the scenes conveys the family economy and social detail and the customs and laws that are in them.<sup>26</sup> Vv. 24 and 32 give an end to each of the section (11-24 and 25-32) of the parable. These two verses end with the word of the father: “*was dead, and is alive; he is lost, and is found.*” Consequently, the parable of the Prodigal Son ends with v. 32, which gave the reason for the cause of the joyful celebration, a Prodigal Son returned and received in the love and mercy of his father.<sup>27</sup>

#### **4.1 Context**

Luke has adapted the setting to evoke the fellowship of early Christians gathered at the table of the Lord. As in Jesus' day, the openness and universality of that fellowship was being challenged by the self-righteous ones use to protest the presence of sinners. So we are made to understand is the context, which called forth for three parables of Jesus concerning rejoicing over the recovery of what has been lost, especially the parable of the loving father.<sup>28</sup> “The parable is found only in Luke's Gospel and must be attributed to his special source (L). Luke places the parable in the broader context of (15:1-2) and the parables of the lost sheep (15:4-7) and the lost coin (15:8-10). At the level of Luke's Gospel — whatever might have

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. S.H. RINGE, *Luke*, 206.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. S.H. RINGE, *Luke*, 207.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. J. NOLLAND, *Luke*, 788.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. E. LAVERDIERE, *Luke*, 199.

been the case prior to it — the parable responds to the grumbling of the Pharisees and Scribes.”<sup>29</sup>

In these three parables the Lord, “who is the revelation to man of the father in heaven, would make clear to his opponents, and to all who should ever think as they did, that God at all times loves and yearns for even the least of his human children, and tries by every means to preserve them from hurt and harm now and to save them forever”.<sup>30</sup> Indeed God who is compassionate will never allow any of his children to perish; he is always faithful and readily available to come to the aid of all who seek him.

#### **4.2 Proximate Context**

The three parables in Luke 15, parallel with one another in very significant respects. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin constitute two distinct stages in a literary development.<sup>31</sup> “The first parable questions the Pharisees in the second person plural, implicating them directly in the story (15:3). The second, as we understand, raises the question in the third person and broadens the scope of those to whom it can apply (15:8).”<sup>32</sup> We can say, therefore, that its concluding application to Jesus' immediate addressees suffices to establish its relevance to the Pharisees (15:10). Even though the parable of the lost coin is shorter, it however complements the former parable, that of the lost sheep, by sharpening the readers' awareness of its key elements.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> A.J. HULTGREN, *The parables of Jesus*, 72-73.

<sup>30</sup> C.J. CALLAN, *The Parable of Christ*, 332.

<sup>31</sup> E. LAVERDIERE, *Luke*, 201

<sup>32</sup> E. LAVERDIERE, *Luke*, 202.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. E. LAVERDIERE, *Luke*, 202.

The parable of the lost sheep and lost coin involve animals and inanimate beings as main “characters.” Each of them uses groups of characters (the ninety-nine and the nine) as collective units to fill the role of one of the subordinates. The lost sheep and lost coin are also much shorter and less detailed, and each is introduced with a rhetorical question beginning with “what man (or woman) of you ... [would not do such and such]?”<sup>34</sup>

Thus, Jesus' openness to tax collectors and sinners prompts the Pharisees' reaction. He has shown them the love of the Father; now their drawing closer to him serves as a sign of repentance (15:1). By receiving them, he accepts their change of heart, thus he eats with them, communicates with them, in solidarity with them (15:2).<sup>35</sup> “By implication, these parables also present the Christian meal as a joyful celebration of God's love for our salvation.”<sup>36</sup>

#### **4.3 Immediate Context**

According to Hobbs to determine Jesus' real purpose in this parable, we must go back to the beginning of the chapter, which is Luke 15: 1-2, and see the attitude of the Pharisees and scribes toward publicans and sinners. He argues that the attention is not on the younger son nor on the father but on the elder son. For him, the primary lesson in the parable, is to show in a real-life situation the attitude of the self-righteous Pharisees toward publican and sinners.<sup>37</sup> Hence, “the contrast between the attitude of the elder brother and that of the father is an exact parallel to the attitude of the Pharisees and that of God toward publicans and sinners.”<sup>38</sup> The first

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. C.L. BLOMBERG, *Interpreting The Parables*, 179.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. E. LAVERDIERE, *Luke*, 202.

<sup>36</sup> E. LAVERDIERE, *Luke*, 202.

<sup>37</sup> Cf., H.H. HOBBS, *An Exposition of The Gospel of Luke*, 234.

<sup>38</sup> H.H. Hobbs, *An Exposition of The Gospel of Luke*, 234.

parable in Luke 15 is found also in Matthew 18:12-14, and the other two are found also in Luke alone. The differences between Matthew and Luke's versions of the parable of the sheep are subtle.<sup>39</sup> “The complexity of the third parable is remarkable, especially in conjunction with the two preceding ones. Instead of a simple movement, this parable is developed through two scenes, one featuring each of the two brothers.”<sup>40</sup>

The third and climatic parable consists of two long sections (15:11-24, 25-32), each of which concludes with a restatement of Luke's main theme: joy at rediscovering what was lost. Nevertheless, since the case is now different, because the lost and found is a human being, a father's son, the theme, therefore, is interpreted and further articulated in terms of life and death: he who was dead is alive again and his restored life must be celebrated (15:24-32).<sup>41</sup> Consequently, while the younger and the elder brother correspond to the sinners and Pharisees (15:1-2), the author's interest in their story has been considered to be less historical than pastoral. Hence, together the brothers and their father serve to dramatize and clarify situations in the Lukan communities which are struggling with compassion and reconciliation of sinners.<sup>42</sup>

## **5.0 Criticisms of the Text**

Our major concerns here are the redaction and form criticism of the passage. However, we are not in any way denying the importance of the textual, grammatical, rhetorical, stylistic, traditional criticisms in this section. Concerning the textual criticism of the section, “in 15:16, on the basis of age and diversity of text-type of

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<sup>39</sup> S.H. RINGE, *Luke*, 204.

<sup>40</sup> S.H. RINGE, *Luke*, 207

<sup>41</sup> Cf. E. LAVERDIERE, *Luke*, 202.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. E. LAVERDIERE, *Luke*, 203.

witnesses, the committee preferred the reading *χορτασθῆναι ἐκ*".<sup>43</sup> And in verse 15:21 they said that "while recognising that several good manuscripts combine to support the reading *ποιήσόν με ὡς ἓνα τῶν μίσθίων σου*, the committee thought it more probable that the words were added by punctilious scribes than omitted, either accidentally or deliberately".<sup>44</sup>

### 5.1 Redaction and historical Criticism

The redaction and historical criticism seek to understand the setting in time and space. This discipline attempts to determine the influences and historical situation of the biblical text. This is done because there is a great historical gap between the present situation and the time the text was written.<sup>45</sup>

Although the Gospel of Luke is anonymously written, it is generally attributed to Luke, a physician. We know a bit about Luke from literary evidence in Acts, the sequel to Luke's Gospel. Paul met Luke during his second missionary journey and accompanied him off and on over the following years. The date when the Gospel of Luke was written was probably around AD 70. The purpose of this book was to demonstrate how the Gospel of the Kingdom came to the world. Luke assures the audience that Jesus is at the centre of God's redemptive plan. The parable of the lost son was peculiar. Properties were not usually divided until the father's death; however, it was not forbidden to give an early inheritance. The son

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<sup>43</sup> B.M. METZGER, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 164.

<sup>44</sup> B.M. METZGER, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 164.

<sup>45</sup> An example of a historical question in the Bible is found in Luke 2:1-7, which states that Jesus was born during the time when Quirinius was governor of Syria. (Quirinius was governor or legate of Syria from 6-9 CE.) According to Matthew 2:1 (and seemingly supported by Luke 1:5), however, Jesus was born during the time of Herod the great, who died in 4 B.C.E., more than a decade before Quirinius became governor. Was Jesus born during the time of Quirinius or Herod the great? A reasonable suggestion, accepted by most scholars, is that Luke, writing towards the end of the first century, was confused about the time of Quirinius' rule. The Herodian tradition, therefore, is probably more accurate. Cf., R. BEASLEY — al., *Introduction to the Bible*, 34.



treated his father as already dead.<sup>46</sup> An estate between two sons would be divided 2/3 to the older, 1/3 to the younger (Deut 21:17). Pigs were viewed as unclean animals to Jews and being a pig herder would be the lowest job imaginable for a Jew.<sup>47</sup> The beans that pigs ate were either a sweet-bean from a carob or locust tree, or bitter thorny berries.<sup>48</sup> The robe was a long flowing garment. The ring contained a seal and thus represent that he was a member of the family. Sandals were a symbol of wealth. The fattened calf was eaten on major holidays, such as the Day of Atonement.<sup>49</sup>

Most scholars agree that the parable seems originally been addressed to the Scribes and Pharisees. Nevertheless, we must ascertain the influence of Lukan redaction.<sup>50</sup> From the passage, one observes that no geographical reference is given; the setting consists rather of three statements: Jesus attracts tax collectors and sinners (v. 1), the Pharisees and Scribes criticize his receiving and eating with such persons (v. 2), and Jesus responds with a parable (v.3).<sup>51</sup> Hence, the issue here is that of table fellowship.<sup>52</sup> Even though this parable as we have noted above, seems to have been addressed originally to Pharisees and scribes, Bishop Kenneth Untener would say that, the prodigal son is a parable of imperfection, a parable in which none of the pieces fits perfectly.<sup>53</sup> Some others say that, so close is the fit between the parable “a man had two sons” and chapter 15 that the last part of the parable is a

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. C.H. TALBERT, *Reading Luke*, 149.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. H.H. HOBBS, *An Exposition of the Gospel of Luke*, 235.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. J. JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 102.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. J. JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 103.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. B. B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 100.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. F. B. CRADDOCK, *Luke*, 184.

<sup>52</sup> Thus breaking bread may be seen as a sign of full acceptance. In addition and more correctly, it should be said that these people are not simply in Jesus' presence; he receives or rather welcomes them, a term that could mean Jesus is the host to them as guests. Cf. F. B. CRADDOCK, *Luke*, 184.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. D.G. PEREIRA, *The Prodigal son: a twist in the Tale*, 436.

Lukan creation. It is worth noting that two issues have governed the debate: the parable's language and its place in Luke's theology.<sup>54</sup> If we accept this view of Lukan creation as some of the scholars are positing, then there is an issue because there are linguistic features that are unlikely to have originated from Luke's pen and, perhaps, indications that the parable related to the Hebrew Old Testament and not the Greek.<sup>55</sup> These indications are: "(i) The tension between the Lukan setting (vv 1-3), which calls for the justification of Jesus' behaviour, and the note of shared joy, which suits better an ecclesiastical setting. (ii) The close structural parallel in 13:1-9, which plays no role in Luke's structuring of his gospel, but which, as is argued in the excursus 'journey to Jerusalem', is best explained as a relic of the structure of a chiastically arranged parables source used by Luke."<sup>56</sup>

It is obvious that the original parable serves to ward off the criticism the scribes and Pharisees mount against Jesus' celebration of God's acceptance.<sup>57</sup> Later, the first Christians, found in it, an analysis of Israel's problem with accepting the Gospel of the crucified Messiah and the inclusion of the gentiles in the people of God.<sup>58</sup>

## 5.2 Form Criticisms

It is evident that many of Jesus' parables have three main characters. Quite commonly, these characters include an authority figure and two contrasting subordinates. Thus the authority figure, usually a king, father, or master, typically acts as a judge between the two subordinates, who in turn exhibit contrasting

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the parable*, 104.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. J. NOLLAND, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 780.

<sup>56</sup> J. NOLLAND, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 769.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. B. BYRNE, *The Hospitality of God*, 132.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. B. BYRNE, *The Hospitality of God*, 132.

behaviour. We can characterize these as - “monarchic” parables since in each case the central or unifying figure is usually the master, father, or king.<sup>59</sup>

The threefold pattern of action of Jesus (v.1), assault on him (v. 2), and response (vv. 3-32) is common in Luke's Gospel.<sup>60</sup> Luke 13:1-9, a section also dealing with repentance, has two short sayings connected by “or” and concluded by a longer parable.<sup>61</sup> The story in chapter 15:11-32 functions differently and we notice that it is narrated in the third person. Instead of beginning, “what man of you,” it begins, “A certain man had two sons.”<sup>62</sup> Even though Chapter 15 seems to highlight the critical motif of celebration, the joyous banquet at the recovery of what was lost (cf. Vv. 6, 9, 23-24. 27).<sup>63</sup> We noticed that this idea of the third person blocks the fictional audience's immediate identification with the man; and the pattern of lost, found and rejoice appears in the narrative, and the banquet is no longer implied but real; the father kills a fatted calf and throws a party.<sup>64</sup>

In fact, the point here is that, the father in this third parable elevates such celebration to the level of divine necessity, just as the previous parables had associated analogous expression of joy to heavenly dispositions (vv. 7, 10). Therefore, as significant as the father is to this parable, Green argues that, the centre stage belongs to the younger son - and especially to the contrasting patterns of response occasioned by his recovery.<sup>65</sup> But many others will totally disagree with

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. C.L. BLOMBERG, *Interpreting the Parables*, 171.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. TALBERT, *Reading Luke*, 147.

<sup>61</sup> According to Talbert's chiasmic arrangement of the Lukan travel narrative, Chapter 15 is parallel to 13:1-5 (literary patterns, 51-52).

<sup>62</sup> Cf. B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 102.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. J.B. GREEN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 578.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 102

<sup>65</sup> Cf. J.B. GREEN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 578.

the above opinion stressing that as the parable unfolds, the central figure is not the younger son but the father of the two sons.<sup>66</sup>

There are many arguments about Luke 15:11-32. Some have argued from the perspective of the shape of the parable about the best title to give the story. Perhaps a more fitting title as we said initially is the “parable of the Father's love.”<sup>67</sup> The unity of the vision behind the story can be seen when we recognize it as a story designed by Jesus to put in perspective what was going on, what sinners were doing and what God was doing, as he (himself) consorted with sinners, therefore challenging the righteous to come and welcome these reclaimed brothers and sisters and to share in the celebration of their restoration.<sup>68</sup>

Luke 15 operates on three interrelated levels. Opinions may differ on the number of different levels.<sup>69</sup> The first level, which is the subpart of the larger Gospel narrative, announces in vv.1-2 its cast of characters: Jesus, sinners, Scribes and Pharisees. In the second level, we have Jesus and the sinners on one side, and the Scribes and Pharisees who murmur against Jesus, on the other. On the third level, are the three parables (a man with a hundred sheep, a woman with ten drachmas, and a man with two sons) which have their own separate characters and plots.<sup>70</sup>

“The parable is not an allegory, but a story taken from life, as is shown by vv. 18, 21, where, in a periphrastic way, God is named: ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven (i.e. God) and before you’. Thus, the father is not God but an earthly father;

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<sup>66</sup> Cf. J. JEREMIAS, *Parables*, 128; E. Schweizer, *Luke*, 247-248; J. Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1084.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. G.V. JONES, *The art and Truth of the Parables*, 172; R. STEIN, *Parables*, 115; A.J. HULTGREN, *The Parables of Jesus*, 72.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. J. NOLLAND, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 781.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the parable*, 101.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the parable*, 102.

yet some of the expressions used are meant to reveal that in his love he is an image of God.”<sup>71</sup>

Byrne argues that fundamentally this parable is not concerned with sinfulness, because sinfulness is not in the end the main point. Nevertheless, the questions we ought to ask are, do we really know God? Are we comfortable with the God who acts with foolishness of love displayed by the character of the father?<sup>72</sup> This for me is the issue. I am addressing the compassionate nature of God. Humanly speaking, when it comes to love for people, God acts in a way, which is not easily understood.

## 6.0 Structure of the Text

The parable's power and beauty are evident in its careful construction and organization. According to Scott the structure consists of two acts: one about the younger son and the other about an elder son.<sup>73</sup> For some people, the parable may just as easily subdivide into three rather than two episodes, one for each of the three main characters: verses 11-20a – the younger son's departure and return; verses 20b-24 – the father's welcome; verses 25-32 – the older son's reaction.<sup>74</sup> A few commentators have rejected the authenticity of verses 25-32 precisely because it does seem to add an extra section to an otherwise self-contained story about the return of the wayward son.<sup>75</sup> We follow the opinion of Scott that the parable is divided into two acts. The younger brother's story (the first act) is a complete

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<sup>71</sup> J. JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 101.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. B. BYRNE, *The Hospitality of God*, 132.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 106.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. C.L. BLOMBERG, *Interpreting the Parables*, 174.

<sup>75</sup> C.L. BLOMBERG, *Interpreting the Parables*, 173.

narrative with beginning, middle, and end; the elder brother's episode (the second act) responds to the first act.<sup>76</sup>

Mary Tolbert has pointed out to us that “there is a close structural parallelism between both halves in the parable, suggesting that indeed they were a unity from the start. Each section is divided into four units alternating between narrated discourse (ND) and direct discourse (DD):

A [ND] the younger son's journey away (vv. 12b-16); B [DD] his decision to return (vv. 17-19); C [ND] his father's reception (v.20); D [DD] his confession and his father's response (vv. 21-24a);

A' [ND] the older son's return home (vv. 24b-26); B' [DD] the servant's explanation (v. 27); C' [ND] his father's reception (v.28); D' [DD] his accusation and his father's response (vv. 29-32).”<sup>77</sup>

The key refrain of “was dead and is live” and “was lost and is found” concludes both major sections.”<sup>78</sup> In addition, “even the opening verses of the parable by themselves require the episode about the prodigal to have a sequel. Otherwise, there will be no need to include the phrases “two sons,” “the younger of them,” “give me the share,” and “he divided between them.””<sup>79</sup>

However, besides parataxis<sup>80</sup>, the parable also uses subordinate clauses with a string of main verbs: let us use the table below for a better understanding.

Section one	participle	finite verb
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<sup>76</sup> Cf. B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 109.

<sup>77</sup> M. A. TOLBERT, *Perspectives on the Parables*, 98-100.

<sup>78</sup> M. A. TOLBERT, *Perspectives on the Parables*, 98-100.

<sup>79</sup> C.L. BLOMBERG, *Interpreting the Parables*, 174.

<sup>80</sup> The combination of clauses or phrases without the use of conjunctions such as “and” or “so,” example. “He saved my life - he deserves a meal.” Whereas, asyndeton means the omission of conjunctions in sentence constructions in which they would usually be used.

1.	gathering together	he departed he squandered
2.	having spent	It happened he began
3.	going	he [son] was attached he [citizen] sent he [son] longed no one gave

“With a few simple verbs, the narrator paints a story of disaster. The first principle is negated by the second, which also reinforces the final finite verb of the first clause, “he squandered.” The motion of departing is continued with the third participle so that this set defines the tragic motion of the plot.”<sup>81</sup> We are told that the four verbs of the third section introduce a rapid shifting of subject, which shows that the son is no longer in control of his own story. In the second set, the finite verb is “it happened”, and the son falls into passive action: “he began”, “he was attached”, “he longed”.<sup>82</sup> The younger son's journey shares the ancient structural composition of setting out and coming home, that comprises a central theme in myth and religion.<sup>83</sup> There is a progressive psychological movement<sup>84</sup> and also a parallelism and antithesis between the various parts of the story.<sup>85</sup>

The son's and father's speeches show the same type of arrangement. Here is the pattern of the son's speech, which covers verses 18-20a:

Section	participle	finite verb
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<sup>81</sup> B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 106.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 106.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. D. MCBRIDE, *The Gospel of Luke*, 205

<sup>84</sup> The younger son yearns for a life different from that experienced at home. He is dissatisfied with home and he longs to travel. He leaves home and discovers that his promised land is barren of hope. He experiences failure. Then he yearns to return home. We have his journey of return and his welcome home party by the father.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. D. MCBRIDE, *The Gospel of Luke*, 205.

4	coming	he said
5	“rising up”	“I will go”
		“I will say”
6	rising up	he came

The fourth and sixth sets are the narrator's; the fifth is the son's speech. We discover that the principle of the fourth set, coming, is the opposite of that of the third, going, thus stopping the plot's tragic downward spiral and reversing its motion upwards towards comedy. The twice repeated rising up, once spoken in direct speech, once in narration, metaphorically symbolizes the plot's direction.

Section	participle	finite verb
7	being away	his father saw
		[he] had
compassion		
8	running	he fell
		he kissed

In verse 20b, we have “the denouement of the first act. The seventh principle indicates that the distance between father and son is not really sufficient to separate them, and in the eighth set, the father overcomes that distance.”<sup>86</sup> Thus, we can say that the remaining part of the first act simply carries out the implication, while the paratactic structure remains.<sup>87</sup>

Section	participle	finite verb
9	[quickly]	bring and cloth

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<sup>86</sup> B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 107.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 107.



		put
		bring and kill
10	eating	let us make merry

There is a difference in the ninth section because it does not begin with a participle but an adverb. This “adverb belongs to the string of participles because the participles have all served to indicate orientation and this adverb orientates the father to his son.”<sup>88</sup> This orientation of the father to the son is an action that speaks of forgiveness and full reconciliation of the son back to the family.<sup>89</sup>

There is somewhat a similar organization pattern (though not obvious) in the second act (vv. 25-32) which involves the elder son. In this section, “the narrative characterization is deft and subversive.”<sup>90</sup> This is so because: first, the narrator only surfaced in the introduction and is less noticed. The act is a direct interaction involving the elder son and the father. Second, the tone of the act is different. It is a confrontation between the elder son and the father; whereas the first act (13-24) descends to tragedy and rises to forgiveness.<sup>91</sup> The pattern thus:

Section	participle	finite verb
11	coming	he drew near he heard
12	calling	he inquired

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<sup>88</sup> B. B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 107.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. S.C. BARTON, “*Parables on God’s Love and Forgiveness*,” 211.

<sup>90</sup> S.C. BARTON, “*Parables on God’s Love and Forgiveness*,” 212.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 107.

“We see the verb coming playing a great role. The elder son is away from the house in the field when action starts. ‘Coming, he drew near to the house,’ but he is not in the house. The response of the servant to the question asked implies that the father has shown compassion and forgiveness to the son, since they have killed the fatted calf for his coming back.”<sup>92</sup> The father's response is very significant because it reverts to the participle/ finite verb pattern, using a participle of coming. We have:

Section	participle	finite verb
13	coming out	he pleaded
14	answering	he said

The son's response to his father's pleading reverts to the familiar pattern; he was angry and sad against his father for accepting his younger brother and celebrating him for his misdeeds. “The father's final response to the son is crucial and very evident in Greek:

<i>Su</i>	<i>pantote</i>	<i>met'emou</i>	<i>ei</i>		
You	always	with me	are		
<i>Kai panta</i>	<i>ta</i>	<i>ema</i>	<i>sa</i>	<i>estin</i>	
And everything	that	[is]	mine	yours	is

This rhythmic speech contrasts with the anger of the son's protest. Thus, while the first act of the parable gives us a downward plot towards tragedy and then upward towards the father; the second act continues with the first but builds more around verbs of coming which distances the elder son from the father and the younger son.”<sup>93</sup>

<sup>92</sup>B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 108.

<sup>93</sup>B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 108.

## 7.0 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have tried to explain what a parable is. In one of the significant definitions, we said that a *πάρβολη*, may be seen as a narrative which functions as religious or ethical rhetorical speech. This meaning of the parable laid the foundation for our analysis of Luke 15:11-32.

In the proximate and immediate context, the point to note is that the concern raised by Jesus is not to neglect anyone but to be human in all our actions towards everyone we meet without segregating or isolating them. This is because we are all children of God, made in the image and likeness of God (Cf. Gen.1:26). The kind gesture required then is to love and be merciful as our heavenly father is loving and merciful (cf. Luke 6:36). Moreover, here in Luke 15:11-32, there is not a question of an irrational animal, or of an inanimate piece of jewellery that has been lost and found, but of a child that has deliberately turned his back on his father and home, and yet when repentant, has being lavished love, care. All wrong done away with.<sup>94</sup>

From the perspective of form criticism, we pointed out that the unity of vision behind the story can be seen when we read it as a story designed by Jesus to explain the mysteries of the kingdom. In the discussion of historical criticism, we discover that this parable is found only in Luke's Gospel. Many scholars agree that the original parable serves to ward off the criticism the Scribes and Pharisees mount against Jesus' celebration of God's acceptance.

From what we have seen above, we can say that after the opening, the parable falls into two halves as we have noted above. The first concerns the younger

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<sup>94</sup> Cf. C.J.CALLAN, *The Parable of Christ*, 332.

son and the second concerns the elder son; the parable finally concludes with, a joyful comment of the father.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Cf. J.D. CROSSAN, *In Parables*, 72.

## CHAPTER II

### ANALYSIS OF SOME THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

#### 1.0 Introduction

The parable of the compassionate father is said to be the master page of the holy book, the chief work of the inspired Scriptures. It is the pearl and crown of all the parables of Scripture. Its details are more numerous, its points of application more varied, than other parables. In addition, in it, “more than in any other, we see the manifestation of God’s love and mercy for all. Here there is not a question of an irrational animal, or of an inanimate piece of jewelry, that has been lost and found, but of a child, that has deliberately turned his back to his father and home, and yet when repentant, he is lavished with love and care.”<sup>96</sup>

Ordinarily the father ought to have thrown a party for the son who remained home and worked hard, but he did otherwise. “Grace seems to abrogate justice”, and we “struggle with tension”. Twice we have the emphasis that the younger son was dead and is alive again, was lost and found (vv. 24, 32) hence, it was fitting to make merry and be glad (rejoice).<sup>97</sup>

There is no doubt that this parable is a complex one especially its beginning.<sup>98</sup> Therefore, since the story is difficult to interpret, we shall examine the text in a critical manner while considering some of the key words and phrases and some sentences used. For instance, in the case of the younger son in this story, we find that this parable outlines a series of acts that lead from one level of infamy to the next. The request for his inheritance in v. 12 gives way to his actual disposal of the same, his departure and the squandering of his resources while living as though he was not a Jew but Gentile.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> C.J. CALLAN, *The Parable of Christ*, 332.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. F. B. CRADDOCK, *Luke*, 187.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 113.

<sup>99</sup> Cf. J.B. GREEN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 580.

The concern raised by Jesus is not to neglect anyone but to be human in all our actions towards everyone we meet without segregating or isolating them. The parable seems to treat the younger son compassionately. This is because we are all children of God and made in the image and likeness of God (Gen.1:26). The kind gesture required then is to love and be merciful as our heavenly father is loving and merciful (cf. Luke 6:36). Pope Francis puts it as follows:

In the Liturgy today we read chapter 15 of the Gospel of Luke, which contains three parables of mercy: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and then the longest of them, characteristic of St Luke, the parable of the father of two sons, the “prodigal” son and the son who believes he is “righteous”, who believes he is saintly. All three of these parables speak of the joy of God. God is joyful. This is interesting: God is joyful! And what is the joy of God? The joy of God is forgiving! The joy of a shepherd who finds his little lamb; the joy of a woman who finds her coin; it is the joy of a father welcoming home the son who was lost, who was as though dead and has come back to life, who has come home. Here is the entire Gospel! Here! The whole Gospel, all of Christianity, is here! But make sure that it is not sentiment, it is not being a “do-gooder”! On the contrary, mercy is the true force that can save man and the world from the “cancer” that is sin, moral evil, and spiritual evil. Only love fills the void, the negative chasms that evil opens in hearts and in history. Only love can do this, and this is God’s joy!<sup>100</sup>

## 2.0 Clarification of Few Notions

“A distant country already suggests the non-Jewish world, and this identification is helped along by the prominence of pigs, abhorrent to Jewish sensibilities,<sup>101</sup> in the story”.<sup>102</sup> This parable, without question, was offensive to the Pharisees and the Scribes.<sup>103</sup> In this community, “there is a condition worse than death, the reader might have expected, on the literary principle of end stress, which the final phrase would have been was dead, and now he is alive thus believing that there is no condition better than life.” Nevertheless, “such is not the climax in this parable’s scale of values; to be lost is worse than death and therefore, the condition of being found is better than life.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> POPE FRANCIS, *Angelus*: Saint Peter’s Square Sunday, 15 September 2013.

<sup>101</sup> Cf. Lev 11:7; Deut. 14:8; Luke 8:32; 1Macc 1:47; 2 Macc 6: 18.

<sup>102</sup> J.B. GREEN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 580.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. F.B. CRADDOCK, *Luke*, 187.

<sup>104</sup> F.B. CRADDOCK, *Luke*, 187.

### 3.0 “A Man Had Two Sons” and the Sharing of His Property

In verses 11-12, we find the uniqueness of Luke’s Gospel. It amplifies the basic point of the two previous parables (15: 1-10). The story found in Matthew (Matt 21: 28-31) of two sons has some thematic resemblance, but does not really form a parallel version.<sup>105</sup> The younger son’s request for his share of the estate, especially the right of disposition, “effectively announces his father’s death.” Thus, “the father, by giving in, exposes his own and his family’s honour and shows himself to be foolish.”<sup>106</sup> The division of an estate during the lifetime of the father is one thing; actually “disposing of one’s inheritance by turning it into transportable capital during his lifetime is quite another, and it is at this point that the younger son’s shocking breach of familial ties surfaces dramatically.”<sup>107</sup> It is obtainable, even though not appropriate, for one to share his inheritance while he is still alive; this is clear from both the Roman laws and the Jewish laws.<sup>108</sup>

According to the Jewish law of inheritance, the first son would receive two-thirds of the property, double what the younger son would receive. “The transaction normally took effect on the death of the father, but even if the father divided the property to his sons during his lifetime, the sons would normally have the right of possession, but not the right of disposal, since the father retained the use and enjoyment of the property.”<sup>109</sup> However, the younger son demands not only the possession, but also the right of disposal; he wants a settlement because he proposes to lead an independent life away from his family.<sup>110</sup> The picture that emerges is that, the father was not obligated to divide his living or property between the two sons, but he did so.

According to some scholars, verse 12c implies that the elder son also received his share at that moment, and at verse 31 the father declares to him that all that the father

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<sup>105</sup> Cf. L.T. JOHNSON, *The Gospel of Luke*, 236.

<sup>106</sup> B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 113.

<sup>107</sup> J.B. GREEN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 580.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. A.J. HULTGREN, *The Parables of Jesus*, 73.

<sup>109</sup> D. MCBRIDE, *The Gospel of Luke*, 206.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. J. JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 102.

possesses belongs to the elder son even though the father remains clearly the head of the household and farm as is the law and custom.<sup>111</sup> However, in the case of the younger son, what is given is in effect pure gift.<sup>112</sup>

#### 4.0 Pigs and the Jewish Culture

In verse 15, we have the phrase ‘to tend the pigs’: as in the story of the Gadarene demoniac (8:32), the herd of pigs represents something unclean for Jews (Lev 11:7; 14:8). In fact not eating pork became a test of fidelity to the Torah in the time of the Maccabees (1 Mac 1:47; 2 Mac 6:18; 7:7).<sup>113</sup> So great was his need, that the younger son hired himself out to a citizen who sent him to feed swine. The depth to which he had fallen may be seen in his occupation. For a Jew feeding the swine was an extreme humiliation.<sup>114</sup>

Regarding the younger son, Jeremias says: “he had to be in contact with unclean animals, and could not observe the Sabbath, so he was reduced to the lowest depths of degradation and practically forced to deny his religion at every turn.”<sup>115</sup> In verse 16, we discover why he was not able to eat any of the swine’s food. “And he would have been only too glad to fill his belly with the carob-beans with which the swine fed, and no one gave him (anything to eat)”. Therefore, as Jeremias posits he had to steal what food he got.<sup>116</sup> According to the *Misnah*, from subsequent centuries, no one is allowed to rear swine, and according to the Babylonian Talmud, the person who does so is accursed.<sup>117</sup> The very idea of wishing to be fed from the carob pod eaten by pigs — and therefore being envious of pigs! — but being refused, is even more degrading than the act of feeding the pigs themselves.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Cf. A.J. HULTGREN, *The Parables of Jesus*, 74.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. A.J. HULTGREN, *The Parables of Jesus*, 75.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. L.T. JOHNSON, *The Gospel of Luke*, 237.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. H.H. HOBBS, *An Exposition of the Gospel of Luke*, 235.

<sup>115</sup> J. JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 102: ‘Cursed be on the man who breeds swines,’ says the Talmud.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. J. JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 102.

<sup>117</sup> Cf. A.J. HULTGREN, *The Parables of Jesus*, 75; M.B. Qam. 7:7: “None may rear swine anywhere”.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. A.J. HULTGREN, *The Parables of Jesus*, 75.



## 5.0 His Repentance after Wasted Years

In verses 13, after turning his property to cash, the son migrates. He does not simply move away from his father's presence, but after receiving his share of the estate, the younger son departed for a far distant country. This suggests the non-Jewish world, and "this identification is stressed by the Jewish sensibilities, which abhorred pigs."<sup>119</sup> It is important to establish here that going away to a distant country implies not only a geographical, but also a psychological, distancing of the son from his father, as well as his brother and the community as a whole. Many believed that the distant country would be outside Palestine<sup>120</sup>, to a country populated primarily by Gentiles.<sup>121</sup>

Some argue that the statement, "where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery" is too sensuous. The Greek meaning is that the younger son squandered his money by being a spendthrift. Thus, colloquially, he blew his inheritance.<sup>122</sup> However, "the young man's life is described as dissipated or wild and disorderly, resulting in the loss of his property; whether immoral as well (as implied later in the charge of the elder brother, 15:30) is not clear from the original Greek term used."<sup>123</sup> The fact that the younger son is evidently unmarried allows us to draw conclusions about his age: the normal marriageable age for a man was eighteen to twenty.<sup>124</sup>

In Jewish thinking, the phrase "he came to himself" is very crucial because it marks the turning point in the younger son's life.<sup>125</sup> Literally, "But unto himself coming." "More than merely being in a 'far country', he had been away from 'himself'".<sup>126</sup> Does this phrase really signify repentance? Was he sorry for his sins? Was there a change of heart? "Coming to himself", is it the first clue that the awaited restoration is beginning? Or is it just a

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<sup>119</sup> Cf. J.B. GREEN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 580.

<sup>120</sup> Cf. Luke 19:12.

<sup>121</sup> Cf. A.J. HULTGREN, *The Parables of Jesus*, 75.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. R.J. KARIS, *Invitation to Luke*, 183.

<sup>123</sup> A.J. HULTGREN, *The Parables of Jesus*, 75.

<sup>124</sup> Cf. J. JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 102.

<sup>125</sup> Cf. J.B. GREEN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 581.

<sup>126</sup> H.H. HOBBS, *An Exposition of the Gospel of Luke*, 236.

representation of an Aramaic idiom? Opinions differ as to the real meaning of ‘coming to himself’. “By coming to himself, he begins to overcome his self-destructive pattern of behaviour.”<sup>127</sup> Scott argues that to consider “this coming to himself” as a “development of? repentance is to turn the narrative into a theologoumenon since after all it was his stomach that induced his return.”<sup>128</sup> One thing is certain about the younger son: What he comes to recognize is his loss of status, the deteriorating social condition that has enveloped him. “Now he realizes that even as a day labourer — a hireling whose subsistence is vulnerable to the full range of natural forces, seasonal needs of production of crops, and the whims of the estate manager — his lot would be desirable when compared to his present condition.”<sup>129</sup> This recognition serves as “a barometer of the depths to which the younger son has sunk.”<sup>130</sup>

Since every sin is a form of insanity, he came unto himself, or back to his right senses.<sup>131</sup> While the basis of the son’s repentance is clearly his own situation of desperate need, and a desire to improve his lot, as we have pointed out before, it is wrong-headed to question his sincerity or to detect continuing pride in his bid to become an independent employee.<sup>132</sup>

Therefore, Jesus is saying that even a publican or a sinner is capable of repentance. If this is the case then why should we write them off and condemn them outright? “No man sinks so low but that there is hope for him. There is something even in the worst of sinners which still reminds him of what God intends that he should be.”<sup>133</sup> The memory of his father’s house brought this young man unto himself. Then he made a decision, “I will arise” and go to my father. These words, “I will arise”<sup>134</sup> are to be the central verbal form of this

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<sup>127</sup> B.B. SCOTT, *Hear then the Parable*, 116.

<sup>128</sup> B.B. SCOTT, *Hear then the Parable*, 116.

<sup>129</sup> J.B. GREEN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 581.

<sup>130</sup> J.B. GREEN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 581.

<sup>131</sup> Cf. H.H. HOBBS, *An Exposition of the Gospel of Luke*, 236.

<sup>132</sup> Cf. J. NOLLAND, *Luke*, 784.

<sup>133</sup> H.H. HOBBS, *An Exposition of the Gospel of Luke*, 236.

<sup>134</sup> (Literally, having arisen), is somewhat pleonastic, but it does mark the beginning of the son’s decisive change of direction. Cf. J. NOLLAND, *Luke*, 784.

chapter because they mark the onset of a new series of actions in the son's life through which he will be restored. It is worthy of note that in the younger son's soliloquy, he assumes that his father will surely treat him as a slave since he has lost all his merits.<sup>135</sup> It is clear that the son views his situation in legal terms. He has lost his son-ship and does not expect it to be restored. In his mind, he expects things to be earned; thus, he will earn his bread as a hired servant.<sup>136</sup> "The son speaks truly in speaking of his unworthiness to be called son any longer."<sup>137</sup> For him:

He would ask not to be restored to son-ship, but merely to become a "hired servant". Now a hired servant was not only less than a son but [also] less than a slave. A slave at least had security. But a hired servant could be dismissed from his position. Whatever he received would be by grace rather than merit.<sup>138</sup>

The word "father" is used three times in this subsection. Within the Lukan narrative, father has repeatedly been correlated with compassion.<sup>139</sup> Luke in this parable demonstrates that the greater the distance the clearer it is that it is the father who actively initiates restoration. Nolland observes that the movement of compassion is to be compared to that in 7:13 (Jesus to the widow of Nain) and 10:33 (the Samaritan to the man who had fallen among thieves).<sup>140</sup> Let us then consider the actions, attitudes and compassion of the father in this parable.

## **6.0 The Father's Compassion and His Attitude**

We have noticed a twist in the story: the father's attitude is very unexpected and conflicts with the son's reading. The father's love totally overshadows the son's recently acquired sense of unworthiness. "The father is neither interested in hearing speeches from the counsel for the defence nor in making them for the counsel for the prosecution."<sup>141</sup> We have already noticed that, as the son is busy with the rehearsed speech: the father on the

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<sup>135</sup> Cf. J.B. GREEN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 582.

<sup>136</sup> Cf. B.B. SCOTT, *Hear then the Parable*, 117.

<sup>137</sup> J. NOLLAND, *Luke*, 784.

<sup>138</sup> H.H. HOBBS, *An Exposition of the Gospel of Luke*, 236.

<sup>139</sup> Cf. J.B. GREEN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 582.

<sup>140</sup> Cf. J. NOLLAND, *Luke*, 784.

<sup>141</sup> D. MCBRIDE, *The Gospel of Luke*, 207.

other hand is busy telling the servants to bring the best robe, the ring, and sandals, and ‘giving’ orders to kill the fatted calf.<sup>142</sup> Perhaps asking questions about the father may be difficult given our prejudice about this father being so God-like. “Wasn’t it just too bad that he should wait for a crisis of this magnitude to find a reason to express his appreciation of his elder son?”<sup>143</sup> Was the father trying to cover up? Was he feeling guilty, having a sense of remorse that he was partly responsible for his younger son’s behaviour, bad as it was? Or was it that having tried to discipline his son and make him follow the way of Torah, he experienced failure and finally in exasperation and frustration let him have his way and felt that giving him his share of the property was a small price to pay for getting rid of him?<sup>144</sup> On the other hand, can we say that, there was a niggling guilt in the father: the reason he went out ‘morning and evening’ to look out for his son’s return? And was it the cause of his own repentance which led to final joy on seeing the son staggering and limping back home, so feeble and crestfallen? The parable says, while he was far off, his father saw him and had pity, and running towards him he fell upon his neck and kissed him affectionately. ‘Pity’ can mean mercy (*Rachum*);<sup>145</sup> the Hebrew term indicates deep tender, emotional love, usually rooted in some natural bond. It can also mean gracious (*Channun*) a term which indicates a heartfelt response by someone who has something to give to one in need. It indicates that someone superior freely gives to an inferior, who has no claim whatsoever for such a gracious treatment (e.g. a beggar).<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Cf. D. MCBRIDE, *The Gospel of Luke*, 207.

<sup>143</sup> D.G PEREIRA, *The Prodigal Son: A Twist in the Tale*, 437.

<sup>144</sup> Cf. D.G PEREIRA, *The Prodigal Son: A Twist in the Tale*, 437.

<sup>145</sup> There are two texts which illustrate this emotional love from the Old Testament. (a) Is. 49:15: “Can a woman forget her sucking child, so as not to have compassion for the child of her womb? Even if she forgets, I shall not forget you.” So here, God’s love is shown as superior even to the woman’s love for her baby. (b) Hos. 2:25: “...And I will show compassion to the ‘un-compassioned’ (LO RUCHAMAH).” Hosea is the prophet who shows most clearly that God is passionately involved with us. Our sins make him really suffer. Yet here the rejected daughter of Hosea (LO RUCHAMAH = the ‘un-compassioned’), in the final reconciliation is being shown RACHAMIM (= affectionate, emotional love). This indicates the full reconciliation (even at the emotional level, between God and his people. Cf. O. CANTORE, *Note on Pentateuch*, 2014.

<sup>146</sup> Cf. O. CANTORE *Note on Pentateuch*, 2014.

Really, the parable touches these aspects, because it is making another point. Nevertheless, humanly and philosophically speaking, could these questions not be a valid description of a real life situation?<sup>147</sup> The Scripture says, “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1Jn 4:16). In this case, being away from the father has represented failure. The son coming home is a welcome development and the father is willing to forgive.

However “the father goes overboard, and his behaviour is out of character for an eastern master/ patron, for it violates his honour.”<sup>148</sup> In verse 20, we have noticed that the father has been watching for his son. “He ‘ran’- a most unusual and undignified procedure for an aged Oriental, even though he is in greatest haste”.<sup>149</sup> This situation is not peculiar to the Oriental but also in the African context. It is obvious that the father manifests his love for his son. As Pope Benedict puts it in *Deus Caritas Est*, “God’s love for us is fundamental for our lives, and it raises important questions about who God is and who we are.”<sup>150</sup> Hence, the father is not weighed down by his own dignity, he is free to love and show that love freely.<sup>151</sup> Embracing and “kissing are signs of forgiveness,”<sup>152</sup> but to kiss affectionately refers to *Rachum*; there was no testing of the son’s sincerity.<sup>153</sup> However, we discover that the father is not just following legal or paternal roles; he plays the nourishing role of compassion.

## **7.0 “Bring the Robe and clothe him. Put a Ring on his Hand and Sandals on his Feet. Bring the fatted calf and kill it.”**

The younger son and Joseph in Gen 37:3 have something in common: both are recipients of a robe proclaiming parental preference. In verse 22 we have the father giving three orders which can be compared with the account of Gen. 41:42. Joseph received from

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<sup>147</sup> Cf. D.G PEREIRA, *The Prodigal Son: A Twist in the Tale*, 437.

<sup>148</sup> B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 117.

<sup>149</sup> J. JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 102.

<sup>150</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 2.

<sup>151</sup> Cf. D. MCBRIDE, *The Gospel of Luke*, 207.

<sup>152</sup> Cf. J. JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 102.

<sup>153</sup> Cf. B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 117.

Pharaoh a ring, a robe of fine linen, and a golden chain after being appointed chief vizier. The robe is a mark of high distinction. Investiture with a new garment is a symbol of the new age.<sup>154</sup> The gift of a ring signified the bestowal of authority. The shoes indicate luxury, worn by free men. Thus, in this case, it means that the son is no longer to go barefoot like a slave. Finally, as a rule, meat is rarely eaten; for some special occasions, a fatted calf is prepared. Therefore, its killing means a feast for the whole family and the servants inclusive, a festal reception of the son to the family table.<sup>155</sup> Some others, however, argue that in Genesis, a robe functions as the marker for the bestowal of the inheritance by a father upon his younger son.<sup>156</sup> We should not forget that Jacob deceives his father and steals the inheritance by wearing the robe of his elder brother. Some commentators also posited that robe which in Genesis is among the major metaphors to signify God's bestowal upon his chosen people of the land, also becomes a shifting emblem, first of deception and then of desertion.<sup>157</sup> Nevertheless, the three orders given by the father are the manifest tokens of compassion, forgiveness and reinstatement, which was evident to all.

“The killing of the fatted calf and the feast correlate with the theme of nourishment. The son has been starving, so he will be feasted.”<sup>158</sup> However, the two sets of symbols are not contrasted but woven together into the full theme of compassion and restoration.<sup>159</sup> The full completion appears with the father's remark, that his son who was dead is alive, that the once lost is now found.<sup>160</sup> We should note that the “fatted calf is more significant in first-century Palestine than it might appear to us, since meat was normally eaten only on special festive occasions.”<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Cf. J. JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 103.

<sup>155</sup> Cf. J. JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 103.

<sup>156</sup> Cf. R.Q. FORD, *The Parables of Jesus*, 137.

<sup>157</sup> Cf. R.Q. FORD, *The Parables of Jesus*, 137.

<sup>158</sup> B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 118.

<sup>159</sup> Cf. B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 118.

<sup>160</sup> Cf. B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 118.

<sup>161</sup> J. NOLLAND, *Luke*, 786.

## 8.0 “Make Merry and Celebrate Because, my Son was Dead and come to Life; He was Lost And Now He is Found” (vv 23-24).

Some scholars believe that the presence of this verse, ‘my son was dead and come to live: he was lost and is now found’ in the original parable is occasionally questioned.<sup>162</sup> They claim that the language of the lost and found could have been imported into the parable, at the point of the union with vv 4–10; while “the language of death and coming to life could be baptismal in a Pauline context, but hardly in Luke, and is somewhat prepared for in v 16.”<sup>163</sup> Even though the language is striking, it does not actually break the bounds of the story; it comes closer to being immediately symbolic than at other points of the parable. Hence, the story is perhaps more powerful with vv. 24 and 32 than without, and therefore there is no adequate reason for treating the verses as simple additions.<sup>164</sup> The joy over a recovered sheep, coin or book, as the case may be is understandable because they are valuable and we benefit from their being found. However, in the case of the son, the “excessive joy” of the father at his son’s return makes no sense to the audience. At the very least, one stands puzzled at the father’s joy.<sup>165</sup> “The account of the younger son’s experience of death away from his father’s home draws sympathetic attention to the plight of those who have wandered away from life, to the experiential source of their decision to return, and to the attitude which they assume or should assume in approaching their father and renewed life.”<sup>166</sup> There is happiness and joy being with the father and he is always ready to receive us back. The role of the younger son ends with the beginning of the party to celebrate his homecoming. The note of celebration here is a matter of a joy-shared celebration.<sup>167</sup> The stage is now set for the elder brother to appear.

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<sup>162</sup> Cf. J. NOLLAND, *Luke*, 786.

<sup>163</sup> J. NOLLAND, *Luke*, 786.

<sup>164</sup> Cf. J. NOLLAND, *Luke*, 786.

<sup>165</sup> Cf. C.H. TALBERT, *Reading Luke*, 150.

<sup>166</sup> E. LAVERDIERE, *Luke*, 203.

<sup>167</sup> Cf. J. NOLLAND, *Luke*, 786.

## 9.0 The Elder Brother's Reaction

In the parable, the elder brother has been offstage, his character undeveloped since his first mentioning in v 11, even though the story shown him to be in the field.<sup>168</sup> It seems “the economic condition of the family was such that the family was actively involved in supervising and perhaps sharing in the manual work of the farm”.<sup>169</sup> As he approached the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He realized that there was a celebration going on but he did not have any knowledge of the cause of it.<sup>170</sup>

As he approached the house, he inquired from one of the servants (v. 26) what the cause of the celebration was. The concern of the elder son was to know what was happening so that he would not be criticized since he came upon a festivity on a weekday in his paternal home — a festivity which to his knowledge was not planned in advance.<sup>171</sup> At his inquiry, the servant replied: “your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound” (v. 27). “Safe and sound” — one could imagine the matter-of-fact tone in which this message is delivered, as though this form of restoration were natural, expected. Nevertheless, it reflects the natural response of the father — how he received his son with joy and love.<sup>172</sup>

Of course, in many ways, the elder son has social propriety on his side. The younger son has indeed shamed his father and the family as a whole and deserves to be shunned. Why is it that recklessness and shamelessness are rewarded with jubilation when responsibility and obedience have received no recognition?<sup>173</sup> However, he comes not as a humble prospective hired hand but as an arrogant elder brother whose refusal to eat with his father and brother became a shame.<sup>174</sup> By this reaction, the disrespectful character of the

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<sup>168</sup> Cf. J.B. GREEN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 584.

<sup>169</sup> J. NOLLAND, *Luke*, 786.

<sup>170</sup> Cf. D.L. BOCK, *Luke*, 1316

<sup>171</sup> Cf. W.F. ARNDT, *The Gospel according to St. Luke*, 352.

<sup>172</sup> Cf. J.B. GREEN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 584.; Cf. D.L. BOCK, *Luke*, 1316.

<sup>173</sup> Cf. J.B. GREEN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 585.

<sup>174</sup> Cf. B.B. SCOTT, *Hear Then the Parable*, 120.



elder brother which was concealed was made known to the father.<sup>175</sup> He refused the “cordial, joyful reception given to his brother, who had strayed so indescribably.”<sup>176</sup> In this verse 28a, there is a literary use of space. The elder son remained outside in anger while the returned younger son was inside being celebrated. Therefore, elder brother who was the apparent insider became now the outsider, while the younger brother who was an outsider became the insider.<sup>177</sup> It is as if there were changes of role: sinners are entering the Kingdom while those who claimed to be righteous are outside the Kingdom of God.

The elder son flew into a rage, and did not want to enter. The father “kept begging” (imperfect tense) him to come in.<sup>178</sup> “Addressing his father, the elder son summarizes the younger son’s behaviour, intensifying the latter’s failing by substituting for Jesus’ earlier phrase, ‘he squandered his property in dissolute living’, with his own interpretation, ‘he has devoured your property with prostitutes’ (vv.24.30).”<sup>179</sup> In a sense, of course, the elder son is only stating what might otherwise have been taken for granted — namely, the association of prostitutes and girls with the celebrative meal setting not only in the Greco-Roman world but also in our world today.

It is important to note the effective response to the return of the younger son as Jesus draws our attention to the contrast between the father and the elder son; whereas the father responds in compassion (v. 20), the elder son responds with anger (v. 28).<sup>180</sup> The elder son omits the pleasant address, and heaps reproaches on his father. Moreover, in v. 30: he avoids giving the returned prodigal the name of brother; *ὁ υἱός σου οὗτος*, (“this son of yours”) are most certainly contemptuously used (as in Luke 18:11; Matt. 20:12).<sup>181</sup> “But he answered his father, ‘Lo, these many years I have served you, and I have never disobeyed

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<sup>175</sup> Cf. J.A. FITZMYER, *Luke*, 1091.

<sup>176</sup> W.F. ARNDT, *The Gospel according to St. Luke*, 353.

<sup>177</sup> Cf. D.L. BOCK, *Luke*, 1317.

<sup>178</sup> H.H. HOBBS, *An Exposition of the Gospel of Luke*, 237.

<sup>179</sup> J.B. GREEN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 584.

<sup>180</sup> Cf. J.B. GREEN, *The Gospel of Luke*, 584.

<sup>181</sup> Cf. J. JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 103.

your command; yet you have never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!” As we have already highlighted above, the reference to prostitutes arises from imagination of the elder son, who supplies a lurid version of the younger son’s life, which the narrative itself had not given.<sup>182</sup>

In v. 31, the father says to the elder son, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours”. Even though the son never addressed him as “father”, the father in response addresses his son affectionately as child.<sup>183</sup> The father here identifies the elder son as a “my dear son” (τέκνον) with whom everything is held in common. It is an affectionate expression.<sup>184</sup> It is obvious that the father is not going to cancel the merrymaking or question his own generous instincts to please his son. The father’s own generosity to his elder son is unchanged and unaffected by the meanness which confronts him.<sup>185</sup>

In the last verse, we have the response of the father with the very same turn of phrase, “It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found”. The locution “This brother of yours” must certainly be deliberate. He uses the expression “this your brother” to counteract the word of the elder son (v. 30), and to plead with him to recognize that it is his brother who has returned.<sup>186</sup> Thus, “it is not simply a payback to the elder son, but also a reminder on the part of the father of the relationship between the two sons.”<sup>187</sup> In addressing the elder son, the father showed that he did not value his property and honour more than the worth of his sons. His action towards the elder son was that of reassurance and persuasion to make him share in the celebration of the returned younger son.<sup>188</sup> There is need to rejoice, because the younger son

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<sup>182</sup> Cf. L.T. JOHNSON, *The Gospel of Luke*, 238.

<sup>183</sup> Cf. J. NOLLAND, *Luke*, 788.

<sup>184</sup> Cf. J. JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 103.

<sup>185</sup> Cf. D. MCBRIDE, *Luke*, 209.

<sup>186</sup> Cf. J.A. FITZMYER, *Luke*, 1092.

<sup>187</sup> Cf. A.J. HULTGREN, *The Parables of Jesus*, 82.

<sup>188</sup> Cf. R.C. TANNEHILL, *Luke*, 243.

has come back to life. We can note that, if it is true that the younger son has been restored to his father, it is just as true that the younger son has, within the family, been restored to his brother. The challenge to the elder son is to recognize in what has transpired just such enrichment of the family, and thereby of himself, and to enter into the joy of the celebration.<sup>189</sup>

Thus, v. 32 ends the second act of the parable of the Prodigal Son (vv. 25-32). It also re-echoes the words of the father which ended the first act (v. 24): “was dead, and is alive; he was lost and is found.” In these words, nothing more is said about the two sons. The question to be asked is: did the elder son agree to the plea of his father to join the celebration? Did the younger son increase in his new status? Did both sons reconcile with each other? These questions are left unanswered in the parable.<sup>190</sup> However, the father manifested his love and mercy to both of his sons. He is the central figure in the parable. He shows love and mercy to the younger son who went astray far from home and to the elder son who though at home was estranged from the father. In this way, the father is the go-between the two sons in making and holding the unity of the family. Indeed, this is a compassionate father’s story.<sup>191</sup>

So far, we have explored the inner life of the parable. We have to establish its theological message. For what kind of people was such a parable formulated and how was it intended to address them and situate us?

### **10.0 Theological Message from the Analysis of the Passage**

As in all double-edged parables, the emphasis lies in the second half, the ‘climax, which comes to us as a query. Will you share in the communal joy over the prodigal’s return? If not, why not? Can you not rejoice at the efforts to effect a sinner’s repentance?

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<sup>189</sup> Cf. J. NOLLAND, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 788.

<sup>190</sup> Cf. A.J. HULTGREN, *The Parables of Jesus*, 82.

<sup>191</sup> Cf. J. JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 101.

Are you not overwhelmed by the compassionate nature of God?<sup>192</sup> For all who were concerned with holiness before God, including the Pharisees and scribes, this behaviour of Jesus and his teaching was potentially troubling.<sup>193</sup> One discovers at least three important points in this parable: even as the prodigal son always had the option of repenting and returning home, so also all sinners, however wicked, and evil, may confess their sins and turn to God in humble spirit and deep contrition.<sup>194</sup> The second point is that “even as the father went to elaborate lengths to offer reconciliation to the prodigal son, so also God offers all people, however undeserving, lavish forgiveness of sins if they are willing to accept it.”<sup>195</sup> But why this parable? It is because of the actual situation. Some people were like the elder brother, and some are offended at the Gospel. Hence, Jesus appeals to their consciences and says to them, see the greatness of God’s love for his lost children, and contrast it with your own joyless, loveless, unthankful, and self-righteous lives.<sup>196</sup> It is obvious that Jesus is telling us cease from our loveless ways, and be merciful and compassionate. Hence the third point is that the elder brother should not have begrudged his brother’s reinstatement but rather rejoiced in it. Likewise, those who claim to be God’s people, the Christians, should be glad and not mad that he extends his grace even to the most undeserving.<sup>197</sup> The spiritually dead are rising to new life, the lost are returning home; rejoice with them.

Is there a particular model for us in this parable? The point here is that:

God delights in the repentance of prodigals, but he would prefer that they not have to sink so low before coming to their senses. God cherishes the faithfulness of those who obey his will but does not want them to despise the rebellious who have repented. The parable is strikingly open-ended.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Cf. C.H. TALBERT, *Reading Luke*, 151.

<sup>193</sup> Cf. J. NOLLAND, *Luke*, 788.

<sup>194</sup> Cf. C.L. BLOMBERG, *Interpreting the Parables*, 174.

<sup>195</sup> C.L. BLOMBERG, *Interpreting the Parables*, 174.

<sup>196</sup> Cf. J. JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 104.

<sup>197</sup> C.L. BLOMBERG, *Interpreting the Parables*, 174.

<sup>198</sup> C.L. BLOMBERG, *Interpreting the Parables*, 179.

The restoration to grace is not something merited but an unmerited and free gift of God. Therefore, God, just like the father in the parable, is on the lookout for his people who have sinned against him. He wants to embrace them like the father. He wants to restore them to his love. As I pointed out earlier, what is demanded of all persons — both the righteous and sinners — is to recognize that God is ever ready to welcome them with love and parental affection.<sup>199</sup>

### **11.0 Conclusion**

We have seen that the parable describes with the most impressive simplicity what God is like — his goodness, his grace, his great mercy, his abounding love. God rejoices over the return of the lost, and like the father who prepared the feast for the welcome of the sinner. In order to be capable of mercy, we must first of all dispose ourselves to listen to the word of God. We must be docile to the workings of the Spirit. The evangelist reminds us of the teaching of Jesus who says, “Be merciful just as your father is merciful” (Lk 6:36). It is a programme of life as demanding as it is rich with joy, fulfillment and peace.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Cf. J. NOLLAND, *Luke*, 789.

<sup>200</sup> POPE FRANCIS, *The Face of Mercy*, no 13.

## CHAPTER III

### COMPASSION FROM THE THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

#### 1.0 Introduction

In this chapter, our concern is love in its theological perspective. We have established that the parable describes with touching simplicity what God is like, his goodness, his grace, his boundless mercy, his abounding love. The knowledge of God's love in Christ is like the cruse of salt, which alone can turn the bitter and barren-making streams in the land into the healing waters of repentance (2 Kings 2:19-22).

The parable of the compassionate father has a clear application. It is believed that the prodigal son represents the publicans and sinners. Even though their sins are great, they will find forgiveness with true repentance as they return to God. On the other hand, the pharisees and scribes, represented by the elder son, are not only devoid of love for sinners, but they try to prevent God from operating as God. Hence, they do nothing to restore the sinner, and they use their position and influence to stop and oppose anyone who seeks to do so.<sup>201</sup> But it suffices to say that “the account of the younger son's experience of death away from his father's home draws sympathetic attention to the plight of those who have wandered away from life, to the experiential source of their decision to return, and to the attitude which they assume or should assume in approaching their father and renewed life.”<sup>202</sup> Hence returning also invokes the attitude of unworthiness.<sup>203</sup>

#### 2.0 Love in Synopsis

From the scriptures, we know God is love, and we ought to love God and love one another. To comprehend love we ought to purify our human concept of love, in order to grasp the divine love made manifest through the cross of Christ.<sup>204</sup> “The word ‘love’

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<sup>201</sup> Cf. C. L. CHILDERS, *Luke*, 562.

<sup>202</sup> E. LAVERDIERE, *Luke*, 203.

<sup>203</sup> Cf. E. LAVERDIERE, *Luke*, 203.

<sup>204</sup> Cf. X. LEON-DUFOUR, (ed), “*Love*,” 283.

actually signifies a mixture of different things, carnal or spiritual, passionate or thoughtful, serious or light, expansive or destructive.”<sup>205</sup> Love is the force, which both initiates and maintains relationships, be it among human persons or between God and man.<sup>206</sup> The theological use of the Hebrew word *’āhab* is threefold: of God's love for men, men's love for God, and love between men and women, seen as a religious duty.<sup>207</sup>

### 3.0 Compassion in the Scriptures

The aim of the Christian life is to love God, God's creation, the fellow humans and our own emerging selves in the most adequate way. Love, therefore, becomes the central reference point of Christian spirituality.<sup>208</sup> Even though we Christians agree on the centrality of love and on the God-given nature of genuine and unconditional love, we observed that in Christian tradition there are different approaches to love.<sup>209</sup> Love is not unique to Christian faith and spirituality. Rather we know that the early Church adopted the Jewish understanding of love and developed it in particular ways. It is clearly evident how the Synoptic Gospels all quote Deut.6:5-6 and Lev. 19:18 while affirming the dual commandment to love God and neighbour as the greatest commandment (Mark 12: 29-31. Matt. 22:37-40, Luke 10:25-28).<sup>210</sup> Pride of place has the love God has for us as Mulchay puts it:

The inclusive unconditional love of God is the ultimate humanizing influence upon men and women. Jesus has a totally and very new perception and concept of God. Jesus' message is that God is in love with us. God has fallen in love with humanity in an unrestricted fashion without limits or qualifications or conditions or reservations! This is the Good News! Unconditional acceptance by God! However, we have to believe it, we have to trust, and we have to accept it.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> X. LEON-DUFOUR, (ed), “Love,” 283.

<sup>206</sup> Cf. E. M. GOOD, “Love in the Old Testament,” 164.

<sup>207</sup> Cf. C. B. CRANFIELD, “Love,” 131.

<sup>208</sup> Cf. W. JEANROND, “Love,” 413.

<sup>209</sup> Cf. W. JEANROND, “Love,” 413.

<sup>210</sup> Cf. J. L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 521.

<sup>211</sup> E. MULCHAY, *Christology Note*, 2013.

In brief we can say that, when scholars talk about love in the Scriptures, what comes to mind first is God's love for human beings. Secondly, we talk about human beings' love to God; and finally there is the love between human beings, seen as a duty before God.

### 3.1 The First Testament and the Idea of Compassion

In the Old Testament the verb "to love" (*ʾāhab*) and its cognates cover the full range of meanings the English word love has, including, as we have pointed out above, love for God and the love God has for his people (Hos. 3:1). God's love for his people in the covenant context is often expressed with the term "steadfast love" (*hesed*). This steadfast love is a sign of God's fidelity to his people.<sup>212</sup> "Love in the Old Testament is the basic character of the relationship between persons, a relationship with the qualities of devotion, loyalty, intimate knowledge, and responsibility."<sup>213</sup> Therefore, "it is not simply an emotion but is the total quality of relationship."<sup>214</sup>

A review of some texts indicates a variety of meanings given to the Hebrew word 'love'. It can be used to describe physical love between sexes, as well as sexual concupiscence (Gen 34:3); it can also refer to love among the family and friends (Ruth 4:15; Gen 22:2; Jer. 20:4-6); even between superior and inferior or slave and master. We must not overlook one of the significant commands given to Israel, to love the stranger or the foreigner (Lev. 19:34).<sup>215</sup>

The Hebrew word *hesed* has posed a more serious problem to translators of the Bible even than the word *sedeq*, righteousness. What is exactly the meaning of this *hesed*? In normal usage, *hesed* includes kinship love as well as covenantal love.<sup>216</sup>

The mercy of God is the divine willingness to approach human being in a loving, saving encounter.<sup>217</sup> 'Mercy' is often used to translate the Old Testament Hebrew *hesed*;

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<sup>212</sup> Cf. P. J. ACHTEMEIER, (ed), "Love" 578.

<sup>213</sup> E. M. GOOD, "Love in the Old Testament," 164.

<sup>214</sup> E. M. GOOD, "Love in the Old Testament," 164.

<sup>215</sup> Cf. P. J. ACHTEMEIER, (ed), "Love", 579.

<sup>216</sup> Cf. J. L. MCKENZIE, *Aspects of Old Testament Thoughts*, 1300-1301.



although *hesed* is a much wider and more variable term than mercy. Therefore, the *hesed* of God is his covenant of love, compassion, proved by a saving presence among his people (Ex 20:6). God's love is eternal (Ps 107:1) but also related to historical events (Ex 3:7-10). The compassion of God is summed up in the formula found in the Scriptures, which says: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6).<sup>218</sup>

From our discussion above, *hesed* is a kindness that is beyond the minimum duty imposed by an association or a group of persons, but the maintenance of good human relations demands that people do go beyond the minimum duty. Thus, the word covenantal love is a complex reality.<sup>219</sup>

Love as a theological concept appears as a mutual sentiment between God and Israel. We can say that before Hosea, this idea was probably not present, since He was the first to express it. Hosea uses the metaphor of the marriage of God and Israel.<sup>220</sup> Thus, with the prophecy of Hosea, a profound theological conception of love is introduced into the literature of Israel.<sup>221</sup> It is contended that Hosea was speaking prior to the fall of Samaria to the Assyrians in 721 B.C., and thus used the imagery of love and marriage to describe the faithfulness of Israel to her God.<sup>222</sup> It is clear that Yahweh first loved and cared for Israel. Israel's love for God is only a response to God's love. God's love serves as a cord, which draws Israel closer (Hos. 11:4). Hosea also speaks about the paternal love of God for Israel and later speaks of the end of love (Hos. 9: 15). This implies that for Hosea God's unconditional love can come to an end if there exists continued infidelity on the part of

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<sup>217</sup> Cf. T. M. MCFADDE, "Mercy of God," 2341.

<sup>218</sup> Cf. T. M. MCFADDE, "Mercy of God," 2341.

<sup>219</sup> Cf. J. L. MCKENZIE, *Aspects of Old Testament Thoughts*, 1301.

<sup>220</sup> Cf. J. L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 520.

<sup>221</sup> Cf. P. J. ACHEMEIER, (ed), "Love" 579.

<sup>222</sup> Cf. P. J. ACHEMEIER, (ed), "Love", 579.

Israel.<sup>223</sup> How is it unconditional if it can come to an end because of the condition of Israel's infidelity?

However, can God's love for his people really end? Will there be a time that God will really abandon his people? These questions are pertinent for us. "Israel's confidence in redemption rests on her conviction that God's love is unwavering, his covenant eternal, his promises sure (Ps 119: 41; Zeph. 3: 17)."<sup>224</sup> Love is stronger than sin; it pardons, it liberates and brings to life, and it recreates a new heart capable of love.<sup>225</sup> God has continually manifested his love in and through his saving acts. Thus, individuals are charged with expressing this love of God through support for the poor (Lev. 19:9-10); honesty in measurements and in social interactions; prompt payment of labourers; just law courts, favouring neither the poor nor rich; respect for the elderly.<sup>226</sup> Ultimately, right relationships, affections and communal social responsibilities are what are expected of those whom God has shown so much love.

The Old Testament is indeed full of the compassion of God, who continues to follow and nurture his people Israel even when they follow and worshipped other gods. The book of Deuteronomy unwaveringly recalls that the love of God is gratuitous. McKenzie puts it this way, "Deuteronomy is the first book of the Old Testament to incorporate the idea of love in a systematic way into its thought, and it remains the Old Testament book in which the conception has the largest place".<sup>227</sup> Readings Deuteronomy, one discovers that in contrast to the prophet Hosea and other prophets who employ the idea of love, the idea of love in Deuteronomy is dispassionate. The love of God for Israel becomes a continuation of his love for the Patriarchs (Deut. 4:37).<sup>228</sup> The language of Deuteronomy intends to represent the love given to Yahweh as a genuine sentiment and not mere conviction; Israel

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<sup>223</sup> Cf. J. L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 520.

<sup>224</sup> P. FREDRIKSEN, "Love," 468.

<sup>225</sup> Cf. X. LEON-DUFOUR, (ed), "Love," 283.

<sup>226</sup> Cf. P. FREDRIKSEN, "Love," 468.

<sup>227</sup> J. L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 520.

<sup>228</sup> Cf. J. L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 520.

is to love Yahweh with its whole self, without any reservation, and its whole strength. Hence, the law, the ordinances, the statutes, the commandments of the Lord ought to be obeyed because it is through this that Israel shows her love for God.<sup>229</sup>

In the law for life in the land (Deut. 6:4-25), with particular emphasis on 'Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God the Lord is One (Deut. 6:4)', the call to hear, which is paralleled to the sapiential books (e.g. Prov. 1:18), introduces the command to love Yahweh alone.<sup>230</sup> Therefore, it is not an affirmation of monotheism but of exclusive devotion to Yahweh, without any reservation. Little wonder that Jesus himself identifies this as the greatest commandment in the New Testament (Matt 22:36-38).<sup>231</sup>

Typical of the idea of God in ancient Israel is the saying: 'Yahweh is a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands of generations, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty' (Ex 34:6-9; Ps 86:15 etc).<sup>232</sup> No doubt that in the course of history, Yahweh constantly manifests fresh instances of his love. This he did through his election, grace and forgiveness, to the Israelites in general, and especially to David and his household because of his faithfulness to the covenant.<sup>233</sup>

From the prophetic revelation, we have men and women who are confidants of God (Am 3:7); God personally loves them. God, who chose them, prompts and lays hold of their words and actions. In fact, sometimes this choice of God in their lives tears them asunder (Jer. 20:7-9) and at other times fills them with joy and happiness.<sup>234</sup> Above all, in the prophets the love of God is thrown into relief, being preached with great force and conviction. In contrast to the 'dead idols', which are 'insubstantial nothings' (Is 2:8), Yahweh

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<sup>229</sup> Cf. J. L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 521.

<sup>230</sup> Cf. J. BLENKINSOPP, *Deuteronomy*, 99.

<sup>231</sup> Cf. J. BLENKINSOPP, *Deuteronomy*, 99.

<sup>232</sup> Cf. V. WARNACH, "Love," 520.

<sup>233</sup> Cf. V. WARNACH, "Love," 521.

<sup>234</sup> Cf. X. LEON-DUFOUR, (ed), "Love," 283.

alone can bestow help and salvation.<sup>235</sup> The prophets are no doubt witnesses of a drama of love and the anger of God (Am 3:2). As I have pointed out above, Hosea, then Jeremiah and Ezekiel, reveal that God is the bridegroom of an always-unfaithful Israel; this passionate and exclusive love of God is rewarded by ingratitude and betrayal.<sup>236</sup>

In the Psalms and the Wisdom books, it can be noted that a fresh impetus is provided about Yahweh's love for his people, including individuals. These people or individuals who submit themselves to God are called children of God, or friends of God (Wis. 7:27; Ps 60: 7). The perennial love and mercy of God is nevertheless extended not only to humankind but also to all creatures. In the Wisdom literature, the divine love is experienced not so much in the form of free and unconditional love as we find in the prophets, but more of God's response to human beings submission of themselves in humble obedience to him and their faithful observance of the laws (Prov. 8:17; Wis. 4:10; Sir. 4:14).<sup>237</sup> Indeed, purified by trials after the exile, Israel discovers that God is addressing himself to the heart of every individual. Now the eternal love of God is known to each person especially the just, poor and the lowly.<sup>238</sup> And it is quite evident that:

Covenant of love is broader than the covenant itself. Covenant of love is the movement of the will of Yahweh that initiates and continues the history of Israel (Isa 54:10). Indeed the entire history of the encounter of Israel with Yahweh — and this is the history of Israel — can be summed up as one act of covenant of love.<sup>239</sup>

This love of God reaches its full and perfect manifestation in messianic times when God performs the saving act which he had promised (Lk 1:72). This loving actualization is the person and saving presence of Jesus (Mk 5:19).<sup>240</sup> It is obvious that his encounters with all kinds of people (for example, friends, children, women, beggars, sick and suffering people, sinners, foreigners and enemies) reflect God's universal love. Indeed, God wishes to

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<sup>235</sup> Cf. V. WARNACH, "Love," 518-542.

<sup>236</sup> Cf. X. LEON-DUFOUR, (ed), "Love," 283.

<sup>237</sup> Cf. V. WARNACH, "Love," 522.

<sup>238</sup> Cf. X. LEON-DUFOUR, (ed), "Love," 284.

<sup>239</sup> Cf. J. L. MCKENZIE, *Aspects of Old Testament Thoughts*, 1301.

<sup>240</sup> Cf. T. M. MCFADDE, "Mercy of God," 2341.

gather all around his creative and compassionate presence.<sup>241</sup> “Love became the theological lodestone of nascent Christianity.”<sup>242</sup> Christ's sacrifice on the cross is the ultimate sign of God's love for the whole of humanity (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 8:39).<sup>243</sup>

### 3.2 Compassion in the New Testament

The Greek word *έρος* (*erós*), *φιλιά* (*philia*), and *ἀγάπη* (*agape*) and their cognates designate love. It is contended that *erós* is much concerned with the passion of sexual desire and hence does not appear in the New Testament; while *φιλιά* is much more interested in the friendship dimension of love. Thus, *ἀγάπη* is preferred since it is less profane, to bring out the meaning of the Christian idea of love. In its English equivalence, we have the word ‘charity’, which shows its unique character in sacrifice.<sup>244</sup>

In the New Testament, God's mercy is a manifestation of his love, perfect solidarity with humanity (Cf. Heb 2:17), revealed in and through Jesus (Heb 4: 14-16). Thus, it is a historical actualization of God's freedom, so that he bestows his saving compassion on those who call upon him (Rom 10:12) and brings them into his divine presence (2Cor 4:14). Therefore, “the communication of Jesus’ perfectionism upon sinful man is a manifestation of the divine compassion and love.”<sup>245</sup> All biblical texts see God's love at work in Jesus Christ and show how God has accepted Jesus' love and confirmed it in the resurrection of Jesus. Different efforts have therefore been made to conceive and structure all possible human relationships and actions now in terms of this love.<sup>246</sup>

In the Synoptic Gospels, the commandment to love God and one's neighbour is called the greatest commandment of the new law by Jesus, who quotes Deut. 6:6 and Lev. 19:18. The commandments of love of God and love of neighbour are placed on an equal footing; even though the love of God comes first and as McKenzie rightly puts it, it is in this

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<sup>241</sup> Cf. W. JEANROND, “Love,” 414.

<sup>242</sup> P. FREDRIKSEN, “Love,” 468.

<sup>243</sup> Cf. P. FREDRIKSEN, “Love,” 468.

<sup>244</sup> Cf. J. L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 521.

<sup>245</sup> Cf. T. M. MCFADDE, “Mercy of God,” 2341.

<sup>246</sup> Cf. W. JEANROND, “Love,” 414.

that the Christian revolution of charity consists.<sup>247</sup> Therefore, the primary use of “love” is in relation to the great commandment. In Mark's Gospel, we are told that a scribe approached Jesus and inquires about the greatest commandment. Jesus answered him, the first is this “the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “you shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12: 28-31).<sup>248</sup> It can be said that “the Christian concept of love, in both its social and its theological applications underwent elaborate and idiosyncratic development in the works of Augustine.”<sup>249</sup> For Augustine there exists only one true and lasting form of love, namely the love of God. This is because, whenever we humans truly love, we love God in all our acts of love. He argues that the meeting with another human person does not have any co-constitutive character.<sup>250</sup> With many arguments, he finally posits that God is the highest good, which we all desire. Proper love is always love of God (*amor Dei*), never self-love (*amor sui*). “Love is the way out of our sinful predicament.”<sup>251</sup> One of the most influential of Augustine's arguments is his analysis of all humanity according to love: he said that, those enabled by God's love, to love God, belongs to the “heavenly city”; and those whom God leaves to their own fallen state love carnal things and belongs to the “earthly city”.<sup>252</sup> However, He posits at the end that the culmination and ultimate revelation of God's love is through Jesus Christ.

Hence, since God is love (1 Jn. 4:16) and love is our origin, our actions must be according to God's design, and that is love. But if we do not love our neighbours, how then can we love God whom we do not see? “Love in all sincerity, loathing evil and clinging to

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<sup>247</sup> Cf. J. L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 522.

<sup>248</sup> Cf. P. J. ACHTEMEIER, (ed), “Love”, 579.

<sup>249</sup> P. FREDRIKSEN, “Love,” 468.

<sup>250</sup> Cf. W. JEANROND, “Love,” 414.

<sup>251</sup> W. JEANROND, “Love,” 414.

<sup>252</sup> Cf. P. FREDRIKSEN, “Love,” 468.

the good. Let love for society breathe warmth of mutual affection.”<sup>253</sup> The popular statement is that “God is love”, and that we must “love one another.” However, before arriving at this apex of New Testament revelation, it is important for us to purify the completely human concepts about love that we have made for ourselves, in order to come nearer to grasping the mystery of divine love, which is revealed in Christ Jesus on the cross.<sup>254</sup>

### 3.3 The Synoptic Gospels and Compassion

The Synoptic Gospels, rather than developing a theoretical discourse on love, prefer to demonstrate that for Jesus love as the central focus of the human-divine and human-human relationship needs to be practiced.<sup>255</sup> In Luke's story of the good Samaritan the commandment to love is extended to all human beings without regard to one's background, country, ethnicity, family or religion (Luke 10: 29-37). It is very emphatic, when Jesus told the listeners to go and do the same. It means: Go and be compassionate to all people. Everybody is my neighbour.

For the general impression of what Jesus had to teach about God must surely be that of an infinite love, invincible in resources, altogether perfect in its good purposes. Thus, the two great commandments, love of God and love of neighbour depend on the prior assumption that God is, in fact, lovable and loving.<sup>256</sup>

There are three words which describe briefly what this love in the Gospel of Luke is: it is patient, merciful, and generous. In the parable of the fig tree, we discover the divine goodness, which allows us another chance, and at the same time the judgment of God when we reject this opportunity (Luke 13:6-9). The parables of chapter 15 demonstrate the wonder of that gracious mercy and love from which forgiveness springs. Grace elicits love in return; this is the message we discover in Luke 7: 36.<sup>257</sup> Furthermore, God's generosity is illustrated in Jesus' teaching about prayer in chapter 11. Jesus asks the people a very

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<sup>253</sup> Cf. J. FERGUSON, *The Politics of Love*, 8.

<sup>254</sup> Cf. X. LEON-DUFOUR, (ed), “*Love*,” 283.

<sup>255</sup> Cf. W. JEANROND, “*Love*,” 414.

<sup>256</sup> G. JOHNSTON, “*Love in the New Testament*,” 169.

<sup>257</sup> Cf. G. JOHNSTON, “*Love in the New Testament*,” 169.

important question, if you then who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?

It is evident from the Scriptures that Jesus does not analyze the nature of love; his mind was practical rather than speculative. Jesus revealed the meaning of love by his life, preaching, teaching and acting. Jesus, therefore, speaks the word of mercy and forgiveness and demands the utmost in sacrifice for love's sake (Luke 9:57-62).<sup>258</sup>

Did Jesus merely love sinners as himself? Is this the whole meaning and idea of him been crucified to the cross? Is it possible that loving sinners will exclude or rule out self-love altogether? "Jesus never encouraged that reasonable self-love be the yardstick for a neighbourly love that would not shame even the heavenly father."<sup>259</sup> In fact, "Jesus never advocated love as a policy which ultimately promotes only the ends of the self, for instance, to be humble so that exaltation may follow, or to serve others in order to attain greatness (Luke 14: 7-8)."<sup>260</sup> Such motives and conducts would represent a complete and utter misunderstanding of the mind and spirit of Jesus.

Love, most of the times are never forgotten but rewarded. However, love gives, expecting no return. Love stoops to serve, like the master who waited on his labourers (Luke 12:37). There is also an ethical dimension in the teaching of Jesus, which corresponds to the gracious attitude of God the father when dealing with human beings. Jesus demands a righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees and scribes. Therefore, disciples were not to pass by when they encountered the outsider in trouble or in need, for any outsider is the neighbour to love and cherish, as found in the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10: 30-37).<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Cf. G. JOHNSTON, "Love in the New Testament," 169.

<sup>259</sup> G. JOHNSTON, "Love in the New Testament," 170.

<sup>260</sup> G. JOHNSTON, "Love in the New Testament," 170.

<sup>261</sup> Cf. G. JOHNSTON, "Love in the New Testament," 170.



The theology of love is further expounded by Luke with his famous parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). The love of the father is eternal. The father keeps waiting and watching until the son returns and then he declares a banquet. The question is, will the righteous people be able to dine in the same table with the sinners who are appreciated and loved by God? It is evident that:

The Doctrines of creation and salvation, Christology and ecclesiology, moral and mystical teaching, the doctrine of the sacraments no less than that of the last things—all these are illuminated by the theology of *agape* in their inner significance and in their consistency one with another.<sup>262</sup>

In Matthew 5:43-48, which can also be found in Luke 6:27-35, the theme of love of enemies is elucidated.<sup>263</sup> As already adumbrated in the Old Testament, the love of God is primarily a father's love (Matt. 5:45).<sup>264</sup> Here, "Jesus is attacking a false interpretation of the Old Testament."<sup>265</sup> Some might call this a useless idealism, asking how possible it is to love one's enemies and even pray for those who persecute us. Nevertheless, the fact is that this is not a hopeless idealism but a wise strategy for overcoming the persecutor. The heroic stance of the martyr gives the persecutor a bad image and is hard for anyone, not even the government to control.<sup>266</sup> Little wonder that the early Christian martyrs gave late antiquity a bad conscience because of their endurance in love. "Christianity is not introverted aggression, but aggression transmuted into a strategy for winning through the wisdom of love."<sup>267</sup>

Jesus went a bit further to admonish us and make a little distinction between earthly human rewards and the special rewards from God (Matt 5:46). If you love those who love you, your reward is an increase in their love. However, if you love those who hate you, your reward is an increase in God's love. Then someone may ask, what exactly are we called to

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<sup>262</sup> V. WARNACH, "Love," 540.

<sup>263</sup> Cf. P. J. ACHTEMEIER, (ed), "Love", 579.

<sup>264</sup> Cf. V. WARNACH, "Love," 527.

<sup>265</sup> B. T. VIVIANO, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 644.

<sup>266</sup> Cf. B. T. VIVIANO, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 644.

<sup>267</sup> B. T. VIVIANO, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 644.

do as Christians? We shall answer that, “Christianity is not introverted aggression, but aggression transmuted into a strategy for winning through the wisdom of love.”<sup>268</sup>

### 3.4 Paul's Perspective on Compassion

“The first considerable use of the noun *ἀγάπη* occurs in the letters of Paul, who so fills it with content and makes it so central that it virtually becomes a technical term.”<sup>269</sup> In other words, to understand Paul's concept of love, it is important to note that it is often linked with faith and hope. Paul believes and teaches that love is a possibility because the believer has responded in faith to God's salvific act in the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 5:8).<sup>270</sup>

It is evident from Paul that love is a gift of the holy Spirit and as such ought to shape, guide and lead the entire life of the individual believer and of the entire Christian community. Hence, addressing the disunited community in Corinth, Paul presents love as an excellent way of handling conflict, living in unity, resolving dispute and many other things. Indeed, love is the greatest of the “things that last”.<sup>271</sup> The father in the parable uses his act of love and mercy to unite his family back again. Love unites.

Paul stressed the fact that God has revealed his love for us by sending his Son to die for us sinners. Therefore, it is crucial for us to understand that the voluntary death of Jesus on the cross, which he accepted in obedience to his Father, is not only an act of God's love from the Father who sent his Son for this purpose (Rom 5:6). It is also at same time an act of Christ's love for humanity, that is towards us (Gal. 2:20) as well as towards his heavenly Father.<sup>272</sup> Should we then posit that there is no distinction made in Paul between God's love

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<sup>268</sup> B. T. VIVIANO, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 644.

<sup>269</sup> G. JOHNSTON, “*Love in the New Testament*,” 170.

<sup>270</sup> Cf. P. J. ACHEMEIER, (ed), “*Love*”, 580.

<sup>271</sup> Cf. W. JEANROND, “*Love*,” 414.

<sup>272</sup> Cf. L.F. HARTMAN, “*Love*,” 1383.

and Christ's love? Many will agree to this because Paul speaks equally of the grace of God (Rom. 3:24; 5:15) and the grace of Christ (Rom. 5:15; Gal. 1:6) in many places.<sup>273</sup>

Paul admonishes that the one in Christ must walk in love (Rom. 14:15). Faith works through love (Gal.5:6). He teaches that love ought not to be concerned with self-elevation and boasting, but with the needs of the weak members of the body of Christ. This act called love is so important that he dedicated a whole chapter of 1Corinthians, to a magnificent description of love.<sup>274</sup> More so, love gives a great deal of personal assurance. He emphatically says to the Romans:

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him. ... For I am sure that neither death, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8: 28-39).

Furthermore, "Paul is careful to root his concept of love not only in the Christ event, but also in the Old Testament, undoubtedly as a way to prevent love from becoming a cover for selfishness and self-desire amongst the members of the church of Christ. We find a clear connection between Gal. 5:14 and Lev. 19:18. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, you shall love your neighbour as yourself."<sup>275</sup>

In Paul, two Greek words express love. There is the love of God and Christ for human beings, which he calls *ἀγάπη*, and there is the love of man for God and Christ, and the mutual love for human beings, which he calls, *ἀγαπᾶν*. God's love poured into our hearts (Rom.5:5) is what we manifest to people that we encounter.<sup>276</sup>

When it comes to the exhortations to mutual charity, we discover a lot of them. We believe that it is a standard part of Paul's exhortations to Christian life and virtue. Mirroring in the life and deeds of Jesus, Paul restates in his own words the teaching of the Synoptic

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<sup>273</sup> Cf. L. F. HARTMAN, "Love," 1383.

<sup>274</sup> Cf. P. J. ACHTEMEIER, (ed), "Love", 580.

<sup>275</sup> P. J. ACHTEMEIER, (ed), "Love", 581.

<sup>276</sup> Cf. J. L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 522.

Gospels: one who loves his neighbour fulfills the entire law, for this commandment sums up the other commandments (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:13-14).<sup>277</sup> Therefore, love should appear in an excellent form between husband and wife, they should love each other as Christ loves the Church (Eph 5: 25-33). Love shows itself in bearing with inconvenience in order not to wound a brother by scandal and by giving alms to those in need. Love also receives the repentant sinner (2 Cor. 2:8).<sup>278</sup>

There is another thing about love found in Paul. Paul sees love as a duty. In Romans 13:8-10 the author believes that love fulfills the law. Fitzmyer sums it up by saying, “from the Christian's duty to civil authorities Paul moves on to the obligation of charity that sums up the whole mosaic law in the new dispensation.”<sup>279</sup> Paul's emphatic statement deserves our attention, he said to the Romans; owe no one anything, except to love one another (Rom 13:8). Is Paul making love a duty owed to someone? Is that person a believer or non-believer? Indeed, Paul is not only making love a sort of duty owed to someone, but his teaching expresses it thus to stress its role, significance in all Christian conduct; and it is not restricted at all to fellow Christians. Love should be expressed and lived.<sup>280</sup>

### **3.5 The Idea of Compassion Found in the Johannine Writings**

In the Johannine writings, the concept of compassion performs a significant and central role.<sup>281</sup> There is no doubt about it that John has given us the most beautiful description, “God is love.”<sup>282</sup> When the question of what sort of God we believe in is asked, then 1 John 4:8 gives the answer, God is love. Moloney is of the opinion that, “This expression attempts to encapsulate God's caring, saving action in the gift of his son. It is drawn [therefore] from the experience of Jesus.”<sup>283</sup> Concisely, it means that his nature is love itself and he is the object of all love. The Father loves the Son and has placed all things

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<sup>277</sup> Cf. J. L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 522.

<sup>278</sup> Cf. J. L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 522.

<sup>279</sup> J. A. FITZMYER, *The Letter to the Romans*, 864.

<sup>280</sup> Cf. J. A. FITZMYER, *The Letter to the Romans*, 864.

<sup>281</sup> Cf. P. J. ACHTEMEIER, (ed), “Love”, 581.

<sup>282</sup> Cf. L. F. HARTMAN, “Love,” 1384.

<sup>283</sup> F. J. MOLONEY, *Johannine Theology*, 1420.

in his power, so that the son may bestow life, even as the father himself gives life, most especially so that he may bestow divine, everlasting life on those who believe in the son.<sup>284</sup>

The incarnate son is therefore a mediator of love.

How does the farewell discourses in John's account present love? There are three things to bear in mind when the farewell discourses presents love as a relationship. Firstly, they defines the relationship between members of the community; secondly, those relationships are founded on the special relationship between the community and God, Jesus and Holy Spirit; and lastly, it is reflected in the commission of Jesus.<sup>285</sup> Hence the pronouncement: "a new commandment I give to you that you love one another; just as I have loved you, you must also love another. By this, all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Cf. Jn. 13: 34-35).

Can we then say that John limits the focus of Christian love to the inner concerns of this particular community? Without much concern to the outside world, the primary focus or perspective was on the mutual bond for the sake of unity in the community and the examples of Jesus' own loving sacrifice (Jn. 15: 9-10).<sup>286</sup> Nevertheless, "one should not think that the community meets the obligations of this friendship simply by fostering mutual love between its members."<sup>287</sup> It is obvious that there is the obligation to bear fruit, to bear witness before the world. Indeed, for John, Jesus' mission in only complete when he leaves this group of disciple-friends to continue his witness in the universe, to all nations.<sup>288</sup>

From the context found in the Johanne writings, we see the stress on the priority of God's love in Christ in response to which the believers are permitted and also encouraged to love one another. Therefore, the author of the Johanne writings is quite close to the

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<sup>284</sup> Cf. L. F. HARTMAN, "Love," 1384.

<sup>285</sup> Cf. P. PERKINS, *Love Commands in the New Testament*, 107.

<sup>286</sup> Cf. W. JEANROND, "Love," 414.

<sup>287</sup> P. PERKINS, *Love Commands in the New Testament*, 110.

<sup>288</sup> Cf. P. PERKINS, *Love Commands in the New Testament*, 110.

Pauline understanding of love, which we have elaborated above, and are sophisticated interpreters of the purpose and ministry of Jesus.<sup>289</sup>

Towards the end of John's Gospel, in Jesus' final prayer to the father, he prays that the love which initiated and infused his mission be repeated, or incarnated in the lives of "his own" (17:11) and in the lives of all the people who would come to believe in the son through the preaching of his disciples.<sup>290</sup> Thus we conclude then that a God who is love will continue to be proclaimed in the world, as those who believe and accept Jesus are sent into the world, just as Jesus was sent into the world for same purpose of manifesting God's love (17:17-19).<sup>291</sup>

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

We have tried to speak of love from the scriptural and theological perspective. We came to realize that God's nature is love. All biblical texts see God's love at work in Jesus Christ and show how God has accepted Jesus' love and confirmed it in the resurrection of Jesus. When it comes to love there should be no barrier. A Christian theology and spiritual understanding of love must include political, emancipatory, economical, psychological and intellectual dimensions.<sup>292</sup>

Jesus proclaims that love ought to reign and rule the universe. Sacrificial love is the pattern of the good life here for those who serve God, and as long as sin and evil remain, mutual love is the eternal mark of life in God's kingdom. Hence, ritual observances, as the prophets Amos and others taught, are less important than active benevolence, and so all people are called to display the tender loving compassion and neighbourliness of meek and compassionate hearts that ignores conventions of race, colour, language, religion, sex and culture. The good of the other and his well-being ought to be a person's care and occupation.

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<sup>289</sup> Cf. P. J. ACHTEMEIER, (ed), "*Love*", 581.

<sup>290</sup> Cf. F. J. MOLONEY, *Johannine Theology*, 1420.

<sup>291</sup> Cf. F. J. MOLONEY, *Johannine Theology*, 1420.

<sup>292</sup> Cf. W. JEANROND, "*Love*," 414-415.

Therefore, those who are children of the day, of the new age, must live accordingly in love. Love then becomes the badge by which Christ's disciples ought to be recognized. It is a sign that they are children of God, and that they have passed from death to life. It is evident then that love is the mark of the church. The nature of the church is to love, and we must not fail to love.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Cf. C. B. CRANFIELD, "Love," 136.

## CHAPTER IV

# COMPASSION AS AN INDISPENSABLE ATTITUDE FOR ALL CHRISTIANS

### 1.0 Introduction

“The Church lives an authentic life when she professes and proclaims mercy — the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and of the Redeemer — and when she brings people close to the sources of the Saviour’s mercy, of which she is the trustee and dispenser.”<sup>294</sup> Our task in this last chapter is to make us appreciate what God has done for us, and keeps showing us — his unconditional love, and to reciprocate this love by loving all creatures of God. Therefore, this compassion given by the father to the son in the parable of Luke 15:11-32, is an indispensable attitude for all Christians. The reaction of the compassionate father should be a model for us.

In the traditional society, the glue of common values holds people together: hard work, honesty, generosity, hospitality, justice, law, courage, respect for elders and youths, love, a good reputation and fear of God.<sup>295</sup> The ideal society ought to have both theological and human virtues. However, the situation in many societies today is different; instead, we have man's inhumanity to man. This is because we have not really imbibed love in our daily, religious, psychological, intellectual and political lives. Therefore, the church must not only take the responsibility of analyzing the values, customs, traditions and practices of culture that are Christocentric and incorporating these into the life of the church, but must also actively engage in inculturation of faith.<sup>296</sup> Christ must always be the centre of all being, and all that we do. The Gospel of Christ must purify and enlighten all. This Gospel is the ever-abundant love and mercy of God.

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<sup>294</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Dives in Misericordia*, 13.

<sup>295</sup> Cf. N KANG'ETHE, *Can African Traditional Values be Revived?*, 6.

<sup>296</sup> Cf. N. KANG'ETHE, *Can African Traditional Values be Revived?*, 8.



It is now a popular saying that, “a child who died of hunger today is murdered.” We cannot have peace, in fact, how do we preach peace when people are regularly murdered? There are so many injustices in our world today. Love is reduced to mere words without action. Love ought to show itself in deeds and not mere words. It should be expressed. Many people die violently, either slowly or quick, simply because they are poor and no one cared. How do we go there to say “peace be with you” when the root of the problem has not been tackled?<sup>297</sup> What exactly have we learnt in the story of the compassionate father?

As we saw in our previous chapter, the love of Christ and the love of the Father are inseparable. The Spirit that is given to us produces in our hearts the filial spirit, a newness that turns our desires towards union with God.<sup>298</sup> Through love, we enter into communion with the Father and the Son. We can, therefore, say that love must necessarily involve union with God and Christ.<sup>299</sup> We can substantiate this claim also from the writings of the fathers of the church. For the Church fathers (St. Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, St Basil, St. Gregory of Nyssa, amongst many others) to have love means to possess God; love is union with God.<sup>300</sup> Little wonder that the doctor of love, St Augustine, says, “I define charity [love] as a motion of the soul whose purpose is to enjoy God for his own sake and one’s self and one’s neighbour for the sake of God.”<sup>301</sup>

True love among Christians and when shared with others is a remedy to most problems like tribalism, inferiority complexes, wars, marital issues, victimization, pride, among many others. This is because quality interpersonal relationships between people would mean that, they are able to honestly talk about their problems and differences with respect, understanding, and acceptance.

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<sup>297</sup> Cf. P. IKONYA, *Towards a Just Society in Kenya Nonviolent Options*, 23.

<sup>298</sup> Cf. P. DE LETTER, *Hope and Charity in St. Thomas*, 212.

<sup>299</sup> Cf. P. DE LETTER, *Hope and Charity in St. Thomas*, 212-213.

<sup>300</sup> Cf. P. DE LETTER, *Hope and Charity in St. Thomas*, 213-214.

<sup>301</sup> St. Augustine, *De Doctrina Chritiana*, 3,10,16, “*Caritatem voco motum animi ad fruendum Deo propter ipsum et se atque proximo propter Deum.*”

## 2.0 Human Experience of Compassion

There is a Latin maxim, which says, *nemo dat quod non habet* (that one cannot give what he or she does not possess). If this is true, then can we boast of our experiences of love and mercy? This is important for us to grasp the feelings of the second son (Luke 15: 11-32), after the father has lavished upon him so much love.

Consider the experience of Mr. Francis Ndangamira, who was a participant in a workshop organized in 2006 in Rwanda. This workshop was for the healing and rebuilding of the families who experienced the 1994 genocide. During the workshop, Francis shared his experience of love, just as other participants had shared it, but Francis's case was a little different. He said, "the person I love is in this room." He said this with profound sorrow and a small glimmer of pride.

A known killer who has spent seven years in prison for murdering two people and leading another five to their deaths, Francis now looked toward a woman on his right and quietly told her that she was the one he loved, for she had forgiven him for doing the unforgivable and taking away the family she once had.<sup>302</sup>

Indeed, there is no doubt in my mind that it was her mercy, love and benevolence that has transformed this hardened criminal Francis, and gave him the power of love. We all need somebody to lean on.<sup>303</sup>

Human experience of love is essential. It helps us really to understand the love of God for us. Thomas Aquinas conceives charity as being essentially the love of God, human being's last supernatural end.<sup>304</sup> Charity inseparably unites two love aspects: "the aspect of the object, God, who willed for his own sake and to whom man, the lover wishes well and surrenders himself; the aspect of the subject, man, who wills the union with the last end and the possession and enjoyment of God."<sup>305</sup> It is not enough to conceptualize love, but love ought to be grasped and seen in actions.

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<sup>302</sup> F. NTAKARUTIMANA AND B. MAHLER, *The Person I Love Is in This Room*, 9.

<sup>303</sup> Cf. F. NTAKARUTIMANA AND B. MAHLER, *The Person I Love Is in This Room*, 10.

<sup>304</sup> Cf. P. DE LETTER, *Hope and Charity in St. Thomas*, 246.

<sup>305</sup> P. DE LETTER, *Hope and Charity in St. Thomas*, 246.

Therefore, “Wherever love reaches out to suffering, there spirit is at work in history for the redemption of our bodies.”<sup>306</sup> The reason is that love is made known in acts of justice, healing, reconciliation and liberation.<sup>307</sup> Love sets one free. Compassionate love moves us to action, impelling us to struggle against suffering, disunity and injustice. Sometimes, the causes of suffering can be so impenetrable that love can only stand and suffer with the other. Yet in refusing to allow evil to break the bonds of relationship, a spirituality of compassion extends the possibilities of life for all of us.<sup>308</sup>

No doubt, violent and disempowering models of God and humanity need to be replaced by images and experiences of mutuality that empower persons to live in ways that promote freedom and compassion, wholeness and connection. Salie explores the need for new images and proposes the models of God as mother, lover and friend.<sup>309</sup> The human being is not individualistic in nature. Communion and friendship is a necessity.

Once Christians know that they are what they are because our God is compassionate and merciful, their understanding will have its impact on the attitude of the individuals and the whole community.<sup>310</sup> Moreover, “the Church as a whole should keep always in mind its own humble”<sup>311</sup> and lowly beginnings. Now that we have experienced compassion and mercy from God, we are instruments and channels of mercy and love to all people, irrespective of religion, culture, language, sex and race.<sup>312</sup>

### **3.0 Solidarity and Compassion**

Love is like a river, it flows around rocks, adapts itself to valleys and mountains, occasionally turns into a pool until the hollow in the ground is full and it can continue on its way. Christians should give and receive love always, since they have become channels of

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<sup>306</sup> F. CARDMAN, *Liberating Compassion: Spirituality for a New Millennium*, 11.

<sup>307</sup> Cf. F. CARDMAN, *Liberating Compassion: Spirituality for a New Millennium*, 11.

<sup>308</sup> Cf. J. MACY, *The Theoretical Foundations of Despair and Empowerment*, 335-353.

<sup>309</sup> Cf. S. MCFAGUE, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age*, 12.

<sup>310</sup> Cf. L. ORSY, *His Mercy Endures Forever*, 24.

<sup>311</sup> L. ORSY, *His Mercy Endures Forever*, 24.

<sup>312</sup> Cf. L. ORSY, *His Mercy Endures Forever*, 24-25.

love. It is evident that the command to love can be expressed differently and in a variety of ways. In other words, love has many expressions but so does ‘the Golden Rule’ (“love your neighbour as yourself”, “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”). Here are some common formulations of the Golden Rule, which also portrays compassion and solidarity with people. “What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man; let them who love the Lord be as the sun when it goes forth in its might; be the cursed and not the curser and let your fellow man's honour be as dear to you as your own.”<sup>313</sup>

Whether put positively or negatively, the important thing is to emphasize the point that we are all created in the image of God and we are therefore to love and be in solidarity with our brothers and sisters. When the Old Testament stresses the need for a priest to keep himself apart from the others, the New Testament, on the contrary, stresses the priest's necessary solidarity with his brothers and sisters in humanity (Heb 2:17-18).<sup>314</sup>

Solidarity is not just sympathizing with people. There is more to solidarity. It involves empathy. The compassionate father never separated himself from the sufferings of his sons. He went the extra mile to wait for his younger son and showed him greater love than before. Compassion must be manifested in our solidarity. Christ is our model. He is worthy of trust and a compassionate high priest (Heb. 4: 15-5:10). Jesus was in a total identification with and assimilation to humanity.<sup>315</sup>

In fact, the men and women that Jesus reaches out to are referred to in page after page of the Gospels by a whole variety of terms: the poor, the blind, the deaf, the mute, the lame, the crippled, the paralyzed, the maimed, the lepers, the diseased, and the possessed. Children who had no legal status, women who had no social status, widows, the bereaved, the broken-hearted, foreign beggars, the unemployed, the sinners, toll/tax-collectors, prostitutes, Gentile soldiers, the crowds, the rabble or uneducated peasants that were

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<sup>313</sup> A. COHEN, *Everyman's Talmud*, 214-215.

<sup>314</sup> Cf. A. VANHOYE, *The Innovation of Christ's Priesthood*, 234.

<sup>315</sup> Cf. A. MAGNANTE, *The Priesthood in the Letter to the Hebrews*, 18.

ignorant of the Law. In other words, all those who “laboured and who were overburdened”, the least, the last and the lowest, the outcasts, the destitute, the despised, the despairing, the leftovers, the expendables, the disposables - “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” - the prodigal sons, all victims of some sort.<sup>316</sup>

It is to all of these people, often treated inhumanly, that Jesus primarily and preferentially preached the Good News of the Reign of God. That is, to these that he revealed God’s intentionality for the whole of creation. To these that he showed a new way of being human, a new way of being alive, a new way of relating, a new way of being together, a new way of being free, a new way of compassion and mercy - a way not based on wealth or possession or power or violence or aggression. Jesus went to the margins of society, reaching out to those whom sin, illness, life-style, or the disintegration of their personalities has made into non-persons.<sup>317</sup>

Does this imply that we should condone sin in the name of being in solidarity with all people? Actually, sin abhors solidarity. Sin does not bring unity nor create solidarity. “Solidarity does not mean to join with sinners and so to sin with them, but to bear the consequences of their mistakes.”<sup>318</sup> Jesus’ table fellowship with sinners implied no acquiescence in their sins, no romantic sentimentality which excused their guilt or blurred the boundaries of good and evil, but his presence to them and his companionship with them in a meal stood for the dawning, the arrival of the gratuity of God’s Reign.<sup>319</sup> It is in following the footsteps of Christ that we have a pure expression of generosity and love. Opening our hearts to the anguish of the world gives rise not to resignation, but to solidarity and resistance.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Cf. E.P. SANDERS, *Jesus and Judaism*, 174 - 211; Cf. EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX, *Jesus*, 200-218.

<sup>317</sup> Cf. E. MULCHAY, Notes on Christology, 2012.

<sup>318</sup> A. MAGNANTE, *The Priesthood in the Letter to the Hebrews*, 19.

<sup>319</sup> Cf. E. MULCHAY, Notes on Christology, 2012.

<sup>320</sup> Cf. J. MACY, *The Theoretical Foundations of Despair and Empowerment*, 335-353.

The Gospel of Christ teaches and reveals to us that our real identity is not on the edges of our existence, where we can parade our specialties and giftedness; but the centre whereby, when we accept who we are, our basic sameness, then our solidarity with people can be affirmed, and our individual talents can be received as gifts to one another. Christ calls us therefore to let go of our false identity and to recognize humbly as well as joyfully where and who we really are. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this, all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn. 13:34-35).

Therefore, the ability to embrace otherness while honouring and respecting difference is the beginning of compassion. We can say that, “acceptance of the reality and the otherness of our own pain allow us to be touched by the pain of others”.<sup>321</sup> It is important, then, to understand that compassion does not confuse the reality of others with our own, or seek to overcome the pain of separation by the imposition of sameness. Later, I shall explain that compassion is not a conditional gesture. Compassion requires no condition. Compassion even though acknowledges distance and limitation, yet reaches beyond them in love; it does this through solidarity.<sup>322</sup>

#### **4.0 Compassion as a Sign of Real Leadership and Discipleship**

Christian spirituality often uses the metaphor of human faithfulness and authenticity to explain God’s love for and his relationship with us. One only has to peruse the Scriptures, to discover the love between Abraham and God (Gen 12:1-3; Is 41:8; 2Chron 20:7); the love between Moses and God (Ex 33:11); God’s unfailing love to Israel as exemplified by Hosea’s faithfulness to his unfaithful wife Gomer (Hos. 3:1-4 ); and the love and friendship

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<sup>321</sup> F. CARDMAN, *Liberating Compassion: Spirituality for a New Millennium*, 11.

<sup>322</sup> Cf. F. CARDMAN, *Liberating Compassion: Spirituality for a New Millennium*, 11.

of the Lord with his disciples (Jn. 15:14-16). This will help us to ascertain that we are called to love God and God's people.<sup>323</sup>

Someone may ask whether compassion is necessary in leadership. Are people expected just to obey their leaders and fear them? Is a leader expected to be compassionate? Indeed, a leader is one who understands the sufferings and joys of his people. Jesus warns us that we should not lord it over them. He is a true shepherd who guides the flock (Jn. 10). Jesus called his disciples to the ministry of service. Just as no one was excluded from the kingdom on the basis of gender, health, tribe, occupation, thus no one should be excluded explicitly from this ministry of service and love (Matt 5:48). The compassionate father manifested the aspect of a true leader by waiting, day and night, for his son to come back home. He ran to embrace him even without the confession of the son (Lk. 15).

There is a popular saying in the military, 'we do not have bad followers but bad leaders'. How does this saying apply to our Christian living? Those people who have been given the mantle of leadership in the church, how has their authority been exercised? Some people even deny the use of such terms as 'authority' and 'power' in the church. Lampe tells us that "power and authority have fallen upon hard times in the contemporary church. Though we speak of empowerment and shared authority, some in leadership positions in the church appear uncomfortable with the use of the words 'authority' and 'power' as description of their role. Despite this, people do exercise authority in the church."<sup>324</sup> The issue here is not the terms used but the exercise of the office given.

Observe a leader who is compassionate; he or she will not abuse power. He or she respects all that God has created, and he or she is convinced that human beings are *imago Dei* (Gen. 1:27); the unique mystery of the human person must at all times be valued and appreciated whether the person is poor or rich, sick or healthy, famous or unknown, a leader

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<sup>323</sup> Cf. P.M. CONNER, *Married in Friendship*, xv, 115-117.

<sup>324</sup> S. J. LAMPE, *Authority and Power in the Synoptic Gospels?*, 271.

or disciple. Compassion is a *conditio sine qua non* for all leadership. The disciples ought to show love and care as leaders; through this we are partakers of the kingdom. Cardman emphasizes that:

Power does not exist absolutely, but is created in and for relationship. Exercised in mutuality, power is not diminished but enhanced; it increases rather than overwhelms freedom. Nurtured and used with care, it is a renewable human as well as natural resource, not a zero-sum commodity.<sup>325</sup>

The fact that we have tried and failed to exercise power appropriately, does it mean we should never try again? In fact, the failure in compassion comes with greater challenges and responsibilities. This is because, the apparent failure of compassion does not absolve Christian leaders from the challenge to be even more compassionate, particularly in our contemporary world of violence and counter-violence, of the oppression from the right and left, of the rich getting richer and the poor dying of hunger.<sup>326</sup>

Showing compassion ought to be an unconditional phenomenon, an experience. There should be no conditions attached. For Jesus, the supreme goal of life is not unconditional freedom but unconditional love.<sup>327</sup> The fact remains that there are many people suffering and are poor. How do we help them as leaders, subjecting them to our demands and conditions? How will they say no to our conditions, since they are vulnerable? In the context of poverty, it is tempting and alluring to use our status and authority to feel powerful and work for our own glory as leaders. People will easily fall into our manipulation if we have the things they lack and which they clearly need like food and money. There is a clarion call to be leaders of compassion and service.

When we understand power, it leads to a new sensitivity to the kinds and degrees of violence endemic to much of contemporary society. Advertising and entertainment media that objectify and commodify human beings and their bodies; national security states worldwide; destruction of the rainforest and the ozone layer; battering and child abuse;

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<sup>325</sup> F. CARDMAN, *Liberating Compassion: Spirituality for a New Millennium*, 9-10.

<sup>326</sup> Cf. D. J. BOSCH, *Transforming Mission*, 70.

<sup>327</sup> Cf. G. SOARES-PRABHU, *Jesus and Conflict*, 21.



slavery and women's inequality: these are only a few of the forms of everyday, institutionalized violence in our world.<sup>328</sup> In our day-to-day living, countering violence and creating new ways of exercising power from within, both personally and socially, is a challenge for the powerless as well as for the powerful (leaders).<sup>329</sup>

## 5.0 Compassion and Socio-Politics

In the area of socio-politics, can we say that love is truly present? It is a fact that prophetic voices are silenced and corruption triumphing. There is no longer sympathy in the political arena let alone empathy. This should not be the case; we must wake up and wake the world.

However, 'forgiving' policies, as some claim is a way out and it is been practiced in many areas of modern, developed economies. Such policies diverge markedly from the previous ideas of classical and neo-classical economists, who argue that people living in poverty and the unemployed should not be supported, because this support could be exploited by a larger segment of the population, leading to a breakdown of the economy and society.<sup>330</sup> Just imagine the thinking, that people living in abject poverty should not be supported because people might exploit the advantage; if they are not supported then how can they survive in our world today? Is it not the responsibility of the Government to set up machineries even to fish out those in misery and assist them? In any case, welfare economies have accepted that other members of the society, most especially through the government, should help the poor and the unemployed. It is not assumed that all such people are like the prodigal son and have got into a situation of distress willfully.<sup>331</sup>

Nevertheless, someone may argue that the issues are rather complicated. Even those who agree on the obligation to help the poor realize that efforts which

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<sup>328</sup> Cf. F. CARDMAN, *Liberating Compassion: Spirituality for a New Millennium*, 10.

<sup>329</sup> Cf. F. CARDMAN, *Liberating Compassion: Spirituality for a New Millennium*, 10.

<sup>330</sup> Cf. S.ROTHLIN AND B.FREY, *The Prodigal Son and Modern Theory*, 11.

<sup>331</sup> Cf. S.ROTHLIN AND B.FREY, *The Prodigal Son and Modern Theory*, 11.

aren't well thought out can sometimes end up causing more harm than good. For example, suppose the USA decides to help Kenya by sending millions of bags of maize flour for free, to feed the poor. That may solve one problem but could create another if it ends up destroying the market for the Kenyan maize farmers, who can no longer support themselves because the demand for their product has disappeared. So one group of poor is helped and another group is reduced to poverty in the process. But if we argue like this, then who can be helped? In all situations, love should reign.

There is another important and relevant situation in which forgiveness and compassion may be a good policy. Actual and potential terrorists and other criminals may be prevented from committing criminal acts if they have a feasible way of returning to a peaceful and law-abiding life. Two wrongs, they say, can never make a right. There is need for generous offers to be made, to encourage them to leave their destructive way of life, enabling them to change their identity and start again with a worthwhile job. Moreover, who says, we cannot dialogue with terrorists? Are they not human beings?<sup>332</sup> In the resolution of political conflicts, some spectacular successes have been obtained by employing compassion and forgiveness. Some instances are the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa; the case of the Sicilian Mafia has been suggested as a possible approach to deal with terrorists.<sup>333</sup> God's love is incomplete until we show love. It is therefore useless our claiming to love God unless we love our brothers and sisters (1 Jn. 4: 7-21). Dodd summed up the matter well:

The Christian takes no part in the administration of a retributive system; but, in so far as it serves moral ends, he must submit to it. He himself lives by a higher

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<sup>332</sup> Cf. S.ROTHLIN AND B.FREY, *The Prodigal Son and Modern Theory*, 11.

<sup>333</sup> Cf. B. FREY AND S. LUECHINGER, *How to Fight Terrorism: Alternative to Deterrence*, 237– 249.

principle, and he obeys the Government, not because he fears the retribution which follows on disobedience, but because his conscience bids him do so.<sup>334</sup>

It is clear that the practice of the early church, as presented by the early Christian apologists, was to be loyal citizens in all the normal obligations of citizenship, to outdo their fellow-citizens in the quality of their service, but to stand aside with a clear 'No' if the state made demands that cut across their prior loyalty to God.<sup>335</sup> They were not afraid because, if we are afraid of anyone or anything, there is something lacking in our love. Fear brings with it the pain of judgment (1 John 4).

## 6.0 Law and Compassion

How can those in government who are supposed to uphold and live out the laws and constitutions be busy fighting, destroying and flinging seats at one another? Imagine the senate president 'jumping through the window' just to escape the wrath of his senators. Does this not sound incredible? Yes it does. Nevertheless, such ugly, chaotic and incredulous incidents happen often in different countries. The scenario depicts moral decadence, and lack of compassion in some individual.

Is there a conflict between love and law? Is law incompatible with love? Should there be a conflict between the law and compassion? I sincerely think that there is need for a bit of radicalism. In the first place, we must affirm the radical equality of all human beings beyond all differences of sex, race, culture, class, rank or caste.<sup>336</sup> Pope Francis tells us:

Corruption did not allow them to understand what mercy is, that one must be merciful. The Bible tells us that justice is to be found in mercy. The three women: the saint, the sinner and the needy, allegorical figures that represent the Church, suffer for lack of mercy. And God's people today can find themselves before 'judges' who lack mercy, both in a civilian environment and in an ecclesiastical one. Where there is no mercy there is no justice. When God's people come close asking for forgiveness, it often finds itself condemned by one of these judges.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> JOHN FERGUSON, *The Politics of Love*, 11.

<sup>335</sup> Cf. JOHN FERGUSON, *The Politics of Love*, 11.

<sup>336</sup> Cf. G. SOARES-PRABHU, *Jesus and Conflict*, 16.

<sup>337</sup> [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/03/23/mercy\\_and\\_justice](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/03/23/mercy_and_justice).

Following the definition of Thomas Aquinas on law, we comprehend that law is an ordinance of reason, (“a rule and measure of acts, whereby man is induced to act or is restrained from acting”), ordained for the common good, (“human happiness”), made by a competent authority, (“one who has the care of the community”) and finally promulgated, (“written and all aware”).<sup>338</sup> If only we comprehend the emphasis laid on the happiness of human beings as regard to law, then we will come to the realization that compassion and law are compatible and not at loggerheads.

Law will be compatible with love if and only if it has a Godly face. We said this following the teachings of Pope Francis, “God’s justices are his mercy,” we should be open “to his divine mercy, and readily and generously share it with our brothers and sisters.” This is because, “Sacred Scripture presents us with God as infinite mercy, but also as perfect justice. How are these two things reconciled? How can the reality of mercy be articulated with the need for justice?” When God is described in the Bible as being both merciful and just it can seem like an identity crisis, however Pope Francis said it’s the opposite: rather than contradicting each other, the two actually go hand in hand.<sup>339</sup>

Sometimes, conflict arises between law and compassion. When this happens, know that the law has become oppressive and unjust. Christians are to stand their ground in love, because Christ would do the same. No doubt, such radicalism would be disturbing in any traditional society.<sup>340</sup>

The radical aspect of Jesus, “who brushed aside the letter of the law in order to comprehend its spirit, which involved his total and unconditional love and surrender to the will of God shown by his table commensality with the poor and outcast, would no doubt have collided head-on with the rigorism of the sects during his time.”<sup>341</sup> His universalism,

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<sup>338</sup> Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Q 90, A, I-IV.

<sup>339</sup> Cf. <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/do-mercy-and-justice-contradict-each-other?>

<sup>340</sup> Cf. G. SOARES-PRABHU, *Jesus and Conflict*, 17.

<sup>341</sup> Cf. G. SOARES-PRABHU, *Jesus and Conflict*, 17-18.

his love and freedom, his empathy for the sinners and orphans and widows within the Jewish society and his openness to Samaritans and Gentiles outside it, would have clashed with the particularism of the Jewish groups, “whose bigoted insistence on the strict observance of the law turned them into closed elitist or fanatical communities.”<sup>342</sup>

It is thus not difficult to understand why the pharisees have often been accused of turning the Jewish religion into a legalistic system. To live out the Pharisaic ideal was not easy - so, many Pharisees of stricter observance joined in associations which had stringent rules of admission to support each other and make it easier for them to live up to their high ideals, especially in the area of observing the purity code and the dietary laws. Wanting ritual purity for the eating of ordinary meals, they established a closed table-fellowship. Separated off from everyone not faithful to the Law and the traditions – especially Gentiles, unclean persons, sinners and non-observant Jews, they formed closed communities, aspiring to be the true faithful remnant of Israel.<sup>343</sup>

In our world today, there are many ‘pharisees’, ‘zealots’ and ‘scribes’ as it was in Jesus' time. These people look down on people and classify the society.<sup>344</sup> They use their knowledge of the law to marginalize and oppress people in the society. The question then is, is the law not meant to liberate and create a well-ordered society? One may argue that some kind of social order is necessary if freedom is to flourish. Nevertheless, we should have people and laws that put priority on the happiness and love of human beings, because it is through laws such as this that human flourishing will be achieved.

Despite the laws in the time of Jesus, he welcomed tax collectors and sinners into his movement and show them love. As Christians, the laws we make must not be

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<sup>342</sup> Cf. G. SOARES-PRABHU, *Jesus and Conflict*, 18.

<sup>343</sup> Cf. E. MULCHAY, *Notes on Christology*, 2012.

<sup>344</sup> Cf. G. SOARES-PRABHU, *Jesus and Conflict*, 18.

oppressive, they must help the defenseless, comfort the sorrowing and give life and love to human beings. Love is the greatest gift we can offer. Therefore,

Those who place their confidence in their observance of the law make an obstacle of the law. For the law is of itself an insufficient means of reaching God [Love is the only means to reach God and our neighbour and we shall be judged by love]. The law is fundamentally what Jesus insists that it is, the revealed will of God; those who accept the revelation cannot make it an excuse for rejecting the fullness of the revelation of God to which the law is directed.<sup>345</sup>

E.P. Sanders rightly argues that “the novelty and offence of Jesus’ message was that the wicked who heeded him would be included in the Kingdom even though they did not repent as it was universally understood, that is, even though they did not make restitution, sacrifice, and turn to obedience to the Law.”<sup>346</sup> Jesus’ banqueting with the bad was an unambiguous sign that God’s true intention for humanity, the Reign of God, was breaking in inclusively and indiscriminately, and was already experientially available here and now.<sup>347</sup>

## **7.0 Community and Compassion in African Christianity**

Compassion, which is the bedrock of any society, helps us in understanding our call as Christians. In any case, the concept of community is also very crucial to the African, and in fact, to our concept of compassion, because, the concrete evidence of compassion is in the living of community life. Many African scholars have expressed this fact in very lucid terms. Speaking generally concerning the African view of the human person, John Mbiti notes that one’s consciousness becomes realistic only in terms of other people. A being thinks and lives and acts in relation to others. Human beings exist in relation, such that what happens to one person affects the entire group and vice versa: “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.”<sup>348</sup> This is corroborated by Senghor who asserts that the “Negro-African society is collectivist or, more exactly communal, because it is rather a

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<sup>345</sup> J. L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 500.

<sup>346</sup> E. P. SANDERS, *Jesus and Judaism*, 207.

<sup>347</sup> Cf. E. MULCAHY, *Notes on Christology*, 2012.

<sup>348</sup> J. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 108-109.

communion of souls than an aggregate of individuals.”<sup>349</sup> The community has the task of announcing that God's love and mercy endures forever.<sup>350</sup> Could such proclamation be in mere words alone? It must definitely be manifested in deeds as well.<sup>351</sup>

Furthermore, the words of Jomo Kenyatta also aver that “...nobody is an isolated individual...his uniqueness is a secondary fact about him; first and foremost he is several people’s relative and several people’s contemporary.”<sup>352</sup> Menkiti’s opinion is no different, for he says: “in the African view it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will, or memory.”<sup>353</sup> More so, with particular reference to Christianity, we say that, the human person is a “Being-with,”<sup>354</sup> thus emphasizing that the individual must commune with both fellow human beings and supernatural forces.<sup>355</sup> If we comprehend ourselves in this manner, then all difficulty is gone, and compassion becomes our very nature. However, the issue is that many believe and know some of this communitarian aspect of compassion but putting it into practice becomes a difficult task. From the above, compassion is a *sine qua non* in the African Christian understanding of the human person and the community at large, because compassion is the bedrock of any society.

However, the community cannot be ‘the merciful and compassionate one’ unless the individual persons themselves learn to be loving and merciful.<sup>356</sup> As an African Christian, the challenge is there always and hence a need arises for me to respond to my community. Compassion must permeate all the nooks and crannies of our being. Truth grows by means of love.<sup>357</sup> Love is not isolated but communitarian. Once we grasp that, then we can assert

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<sup>349</sup> L. S. SENGHOR, *On African Socialism*, 49.

<sup>350</sup> Cf. L. ORSY, *His Mercy Endures Forever*, 23.

<sup>351</sup> Cf. L. ORSY, *His Mercy Endures Forever*, 23.

<sup>352</sup> J. KENYATTA, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 297.

<sup>353</sup> I. MENKITI, *Person and Community in African Traditional Thought*, 179.

<sup>354</sup> P. IROEGBU, *Metaphysics*, 335.

<sup>355</sup> Cf. P. IROEGBU, *Being as Belongingness*, 11.

<sup>356</sup> Cf. L. ORSY, “*His Mercy Endures Forever*”, 23

<sup>357</sup> Cf. P. CORNWELL, “*Unity and Faith*”, 10.

that what is true for communities of human persons may surely be true for Christian communities if love is behind the motive of their actions.<sup>358</sup>

## 8.0 Compassion and Eschatological Judgment

The greatest sorrow of a dying patient is the ending of relationships and responsibilities. This is because we live in our interchange with others.<sup>359</sup> Do we really give a thought about our last days on earth? Have we pondered what will happen to us after we breathe our last? Many people are afraid of death, they actually forget that, “to face death is to face life and to come to terms with one is to learn much about the other”.<sup>360</sup> Let us not forget the words of Saint John of the Cross who tells us that, “In the evening, you will be examined in love.”<sup>361</sup>

When speaking about the mercy and justice of God, ‘The Theological-Historical Commission for the Great Jubilee of the year 2000’, wrote:

The Divine Mercy is like the root and principle of all the works of God; it penetrates them with its power, and dominates them. As primordial font of all gifts, mercy is most influential. Thus, it surpasses even justice, which comes only in second place and is subordinate to mercy. The decisive deed of the father, then, is mercy. In this is hidden the mystery of the divine love, which goes so far as to forgive (GFM, 57).

From this document, we have already a foretaste of what will happen in the eschatological judgment of God. In the New Testament, we have the manifestation of God's love and mercy in the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. “Christ bestows a definitive signification on the whole of the Old Testament tradition of Divine mercy. Not only does he speak of it, and explain it in parables, [just as we have in the parable of the compassionate father, Luke 15], but, especially, he himself incarnates and personifies it. He himself is, in a certain sense, mercy [love]” (DM, 2).

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<sup>358</sup> Cf. P. CORNWELL, “*Unity and Faith*”, 10.

<sup>359</sup> Cf. C. SAUNDERS, “*Facing Death*”, 299.

<sup>360</sup> C. SAUNDERS, *Facing Death*, 303.

<sup>361</sup> Saint John of the Cross, *Words of Light and Love*, 57.



As I said earlier quoting Pope Francis, the justice of God is always associated with his mercy and love. The two concepts, justice and love, as attributed to God, are not opposed one with the other. “There is scarcely a passage which refers to His [God's] capacity as judge, which does not also allude to His attribute of compassion in the Old Testament”.<sup>362</sup> More so, the divine name YHWH also emphasizes God's aspect of mercy.<sup>363</sup>

The very life of the church should be such that merciful love is present in all its actions. That is, the church itself in all entirety should be like God's love incarnate as far as possible. Hence, every fibre of its social body should be penetrated by an attitude of love and mercy.<sup>364</sup> Therefore, the understanding of God's compassion should lead the Church also to a better understanding of its own nature and her members.

## **9.0 Conclusion**

It is obvious even though scandalous or unjust to some people that the parable of the compassionate father has economic, social, political, and theological, as well as moral, lessons to teach us all, especially to Christians today.

There is a call to be missionaries of compassion and action. What are we waiting for to become missionaries of love? Do we need our exams to be over first? Or to get employment first? Or to become a billionaire first? Or to become a priest first? It is not enough to keep waiting for something to happen, we must do something. The time to show compassion is now. Christians and indeed everyone must activate and energize their waiting by acts of love. The fully realized follower of Jesus will be the person who fully loves.

The Gospel of Matt 9:35-10:1-6, tells us that Jesus' heart was moved with pity. Indeed, Jesus was moved with compassion and he does something. It is said that ‘pity may move a man's heart but charity moves the man's body to do something.’ Jesus called his disciples for this mission. He requires them to imitate him in showing compassion and

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<sup>362</sup> A. COHEN, *Everyman's Talmud*, 17.

<sup>363</sup> Cf. A. COHEN, *Everyman's Talmud*, 17.

<sup>364</sup> Cf. L. ORSY, “*His Mercy Endures Forever*”, 23

mercy. Real pity is a spontaneous action and not governed by the rule of waiting until one is asked. It senses the need of others; and regardless of obstacles, criticism and circumstances, it follows through with acts of mercy (Luke 15:11-32).

God is emotionally involved with us, even more than a woman with her child (Ex 32: 14). Hence, there is a clarion call to follow in the footsteps of God. From the scholars' perspective, the aspect of compassion was not the concern of the priest of the Old Testament (Exod. 32: 26-29). The priesthood of old required them to break all ties, both family and friendship (Deut. 33:9). Hence, a radical denial of human feelings is evident. However, is it what the Lord requires of us? Is it the *modus operandi* followed by Jesus? Absolutely not! In Jesus, the separation, the barrier is abolished. He searches for humanity and yearns for reconciliation and communion.<sup>365</sup>

Finally, compassion engenders hope and faith by reminding us that victims or those in need do not stand alone. To stand together in suffering is already to resist and triumph. Suffering, I believe, is not the last word; victimization can be transformed into power, a driving force to excellence. The story of Saint Bakhita is an illustrative one. She loved and prayed for her slave masters since it is through them that she got in contact with Christianity. This hope generates the energy that allows us to extend the reach of our compassion.

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<sup>365</sup> Cf. A. MAGNANTE, *The Priesthood in the Letter to the Hebrews*, 9-10

## GENERAL CONCLUSION

Our major concern was the parable found in the story in Luke 15: 11-32. In this parable, we saw the graciousness of God been depicted. The receiver has no claim whatsoever for such a gracious treatment. In this New Testament story, love and mercy becomes the paradigm for all Christians of all time.

In the first chapter, we considered the meaning of parable, the remote and immediate contexts. After these, we proceeded with the criticisms followed by the structure of the parable itself. In the second chapter we dealt with the theological analysis of the Luke 15:11-32, laying emphasis on the understanding of Luke's community, sentences, and phrases used in the parable.

In the third chapter, we examined compassion from the theological and scriptural points, both from the Old Testament and the New Testament, we also discussed Pauline and Johannine concept of compassion. Finally, the fourth chapter dealt with Christian's attitude towards compassion. There is an indispensable obligation of Christians to show love to all people. We discussed a number of realities such as solidarity and compassion, socio-politics, leadership and discipleship, law, and the eschatological dimension of compassion.

We realize that it is not easy to be compassionate when by experience we know that a person will not be grateful for our efforts and will even sometimes, return only hatred for our love. However, we should not place so much emphasis on how he or she reacts, but how we act is more important. The doing is what counts. If our actions are based on the principle of reciprocity, then how are we different from the pagans or sinners?

The elder brother in the analysed parable represents all those who think that they can make it on their own. There is a contrast in this parable between those who want to live by justice and merit and those who must ask for grace. We cannot share in God's love if we demand that he deal with us according to what we deserve. Each person is of great value to God. We must go in and dine with God, join in the celebration of grace, because our brothers and sisters are back to life through God's love and grace.

When no one else could even give the prodigal son something to eat, the father runs to him, embraced him, kissed him, and accepted him back. Love requires no confession and no restitution. Love brings people who are dead back to life. This parable is one of sheer grace. No penance is required; it is enough that we return to God.

It is indeed a dead son, who came back to life through God's love.

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