

This sermon series (The Prodigal God) draws on the work of author and pastor Tim Keller. While this message is my own, I have drawn in the insights and wisdom of Keller in various resources (book, sermon notes and DVD) that he has authored. You can view these resources at <http://www.theprodigalgod.com/>

Message Title: Costly Grace
Series: The Prodigal God
Date: 7 March 2010
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This is week three of our five-week journey into Jesus' most famous parable – the story of a faithful Father and two unfaithful sons. Last week we explored the first half of the story where the younger son demands his inheritance and then proceeds to waste it on wild living. Broke and living in a pigsty, he comes to his senses and decides his only hope is to earn his way back into family favor and so he begins the long journey home. All the way he is rehearsing the speech he hopes will keep him alive. Let's remind ourselves what happens next:

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him 'Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the Father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:20-24)

Before we move on to the rest of the story next week, in particular the Elder son's response to the celebrations, I want to hit the pause button and reflect a bit deeper on how the Father welcomes home the younger son.

When we read the Jesus' story we must do in context. We have already recognized that Jesus tells the story to an audience of two distinct groups. There were the religious people, the Pharisees – the rule-keepers. And then there were the sinners and tax-collectors – the rule-breakers.

Another piece of vital information is this. Jesus most probably taught this story in the region he spent most of his time – in rural Galilee in the north of Israel. He was in Galilee, but he was heading somewhere. Earlier in Luke we read this:

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51)

Luke makes the point that Jesus is heading for Jerusalem not once, but eight times. In doing so, Luke is defining Jesus teaching and ministry by the events that unfold in Jerusalem – Jesus' betrayal, arrest, trial, torture, death, burial and resurrection. For Luke and the other gospel writers it is through the lens of the cross that we must interpret Jesus teaching, including this story. When we read the story of the Prodigal Father we see hints and find echoes of Jesus' Passion. Let me explain.

Last week I suggested that the Father's welcome demonstrates to us that **Grace is the undeserved, unmerited, unearned favor of God**. This definition begins to paint a picture of grace. But Grace is a multi-faceted diamond. In interpreting the Father's welcome home of the son in the light of the Cross I would offer another phrase for us to reflect on. Reading Jesus story in the light of the Cross we discover that...

Grace is a free gift of eternal value and infinite cost

Grace by definition is free, but it comes at a price.

In Jesus story we read that:

'While (the son) was still a still long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son...'
(Luke 15:20a)

The Father does something completely unexpected. In Jesus day, the head of the family, the Father –would never run. In fact the Greek word translated as run is the same word used for stadium races. The Father raced to greet his son, hitching up his robes exposing his lower legs – a humiliation for any man over 25 years of age. Finally, rather than waiting for his son to come to him, the Father searches for, and then runs for him while he is still a long way off. The Father runs through the village, past its outskirts into the open fields to embrace his son. All of this would have been totally, shockingly unexpected. In running to welcome his rebellious son home, the Father loses honor in the eyes of the villagers. There is a cost to his grace – a cost which he alone bears.

The Father leaves behind comfort to lead his son home.

Like the Father in Jesus' story, the Bible teaches us that:

Jesus left his home that we might find our way home

In Christian Faith we understand God as one being known in three persons we call the Trinity. The Trinity is the dance of love between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is defined by this relationship of love. God created the Universe out of this defining love. Think of the most intimate experience of love you have experienced with your spouse, the deepest expression of friendship the most sacrificial act of love you have encountered and you are only approximating the depth of love that unites the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Jesus existed in this heavenly relationship since before the dawn of time. And yet he left behind heavenly perfection, clothed himself in human form in order that God might demonstrate his love for his fallen world. John tells us:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. (John 1:1, 14)

The literal translation of 'made his dwelling among us' is he 'pitched his tent amongst us.' It vividly suggests that this sin-stained world is not Jesus' true home.

In one of the earliest Christian hymns, recorded in Paul's letter to the Philippians, we read this:

(Jesus), being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2:6-7)

The one who created the world clothed himself in the form of one of his creatures. Retaining his divinity, Jesus clothed himself with frail humanity in order to demonstrate the radical nature of God's love for us. Here we begin to see the infinite cost of grace.

Nigel Brennan is a Bundaberg-based photo-journalist who was kidnapped together with a Canadian Colleague while on assignment in Mogadishu, the capital of war-torn Somalia. His captors demanded a ransom of 1.5million dollars. Nigel's family worked with the Australian government for his release, but to no avail. Days, weeks and then months passed and

still Nigel was held captive, his health deteriorating – all the while losing hope. In desperation, 339 days into Nigel's captivity, his family turned to private Kidnap-release specialists – paying \$3000 a day in fees and began to scrape together a ransom. The family reportedly sold cars, houses, and other valuables to fund Nigel's rescue. They held fundraisers. Eventually a ransom was paid, somewhere in the region of \$600,000, and after 15 months in captivity Nigel was released just a few weeks ago.

Like any family, the Brennans went to great lengths to rescue their son. They sacrificed time, effort and money. They did whatever they could to secure his release.

In leaving his home in heaven, Jesus mounted the greatest search and rescue mission the universe has ever, and will ever know. Jesus clothed himself in human flesh in order to rescue us from sin and the curse of sin – death. It was a mission that of eternal value to us and infinite cost to God – the Trinity of Love.

Of course Jesus did not just live a human life; he died a very human death. Again in Philippians we read:

And being found in appearance as a man, (Jesus) humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:8)

In the story of the Prodigal Son the Father welcomes him home with a shower of kisses. To kiss someone again and again in Jesus' day was to demonstrate in a very public fashion deep compassion and love. Rather than the rejection he deserved, the son receives compassionate, gracious love.

In Jerusalem, Jesus was kissed in a very different way:

Going at once to Jesus, Judas said "Rabbi!" and kissed him. The men seized Jesus and arrested him. (Mark 14:45)

Jesus was betrayed with a kiss that we might be welcomed with the Father's kiss

Grace is a free gift of value and infinite cost

In Jesus story, the Father pulls away from embracing his son and instructs his gob-smacked servants to get the fatted calf and kill it and to prepare a feast to which the whole village would be invited. A fatted calf would feed 70-80 people and was a real delicacy only consumed on the most important occasions. At any feast where it featured, it would be accompanied by only the best wine – the best of everything. The feast would cost an enormous amount. The son was welcomed home eating the best food and drinking the best wine.

In Jerusalem, Jesus was offered wine in a very different setting. Hanging on the cross we read:

They offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. (Mark 15:23)

While he did not taste the cup of wine offered to him; Jesus did drink in the cup of suffering, a cup of suffering he asked to be relieved of, but only if it be the Father's will. His suffering we cannot imagine.

Jesus tasted the cup of suffering that we might drink the Father's blessings

Grace is a free gift of eternal value and infinite cost

Back to Jesus' story we read that as the son is welcomed home by the Father he is clothed in the Father's best robe. The message was unambiguous - the wayward son was a member of the family again and had inheritance rights he had previously squandered in reckless living.

The son was clothed with the Father's best robes, but in Jerusalem we read:

Dividing up (Jesus') clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get. (Mark 15:24)

The Prophet Isaiah tells us that all of our righteous acts are like filthy rags. All our attempts to clothe ourselves with good deeds do not fool others and cannot fool God.

Jesus was stripped naked that we might be clothed with his righteousness

Grace is a free gift of eternal worth and infinite cost

In Jesus' story, the Father's actions in welcoming his rebellious son home communicated a clear and unambiguous message. His wayward son was restored to the family and to the village community. His lost son had been found and was now surrounded by family and friends.

In Jerusalem, Jesus was abandoned by the crowds who had shouted Hosanna just days earlier. He was abandoned by the eleven remaining disciples, caught up in their own fear and disillusionment. Hanging on the cross with only a few women tearfully keeping vigil at his feet, Jesus experiences isolation like we cannot imagine. With the weight of the world's sin on his shoulders, we read:

At the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" – which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34)

Jesus experienced isolation that we might enjoy the hospitality of the Father

Grace is a free gift of eternal worth and infinite cost

In the end, stripped naked, bearing the scars of his torture, abandoned by all but a few, Jesus died shameful death.

Jesus experienced the agony of death that we might come alive to God

Grace is a free gift of eternal worth and infinite cost

In the story of the Father's welcome home of the son we see that the free gift of grace comes with a price tag. The son could not afford to buy himself back into the community he lost with his rebellion. But his Father does the unexpected – he bears the cost – to his honor, to his position, to his wealth – all in order to welcome his son home.

When Jesus tells this story, he is already journeying resolutely towards Jerusalem. He knows that there he will pay the price for our freedom and restoration – a price we cannot afford, but a cost he will bear with his broken body and shed blood.

Christmas was a magical time for me as a child. We lived in Western Victoria and every year we would pack up the Kingswood a few days before Christmas to drive the four hours to Glencoe, just over the border in South Australia. We would go to church on Christmas morning and then my grandmothers for lunch, shared with my aunts and uncles and cousins on Mum's side of the family. One of my most vivid childhood memories is of my three uncles stretched out on the lounge room floor with their belts undone, groaning as a result of overindulgence. Our family likes food.

Later in the afternoon we would pack up and head off to Aunt Jean's, Dad's sister, for dinner with his large, extended family. It was a big day, full of laughter, presents, lots of cousins and so much wonderful food. For a ten year old it didn't get much better.

At Aunt Jean's there were always three or four tables set for dinner – one for the adults and a couple of card tables for the kids. There was a lot of difference between the tables. At the kids tables we ate from plastic plates. Our food was selected for us by our mums. We drank the soft drink that was rationed out to us. The table was always rickety and there was always at least one kid crying. As the oldest of the kids, I longed to sit at the adults table.

Then one Christmas it happened. Aunt Jean came over just as I was about to sit down and asked if I would like to sit at the big table – she could make room. Barely believing it, I sat up at my place, squeezed between Uncle Trevor and Aunt Glenys. What a table it was. There was ham carved off the bone and Roast Chicken with real, home-made stuffing. There were roast potatoes and pumpkin, home grown peas and of course jugs full of rich gravy. Not one salad, not one – desecrated the table. At the big table I could serve my own food - first, seconds, thirds. I could pour my own soft drink. And when the desert came – pudding lashed with sherry and topped with cream skimmed from Uncle Trevor's dairy – I could pile my bowl with as much as I liked. This wonderful, extravagant table and the meal it held was heaven.

This table does not hold a Christmas meal – but it does hold a feast. At this table we meet the Prodigal God – the God who is recklessly extravagant in his love for us - the God who has spent everything in the life death and resurrection of his son to rescue us. It is here that we discover that God's reckless grace is our greatest hope. Here we don't feast on food – we feast on love.

Some of us don't believe we belong at this table. That we are not worthy or ready for the main table. That our mistakes, our past, our fear, our regrets, our shame, our guilt will forever exclude us. But this is a table where all are invited. There is always a spare seat and an invitation. The invitation is here in this cross. Here God stretched out his hands in sacrificial, recklessly extravagant loves and said to you and me – come home my son, come home my daughter. In the broken body and shed blood of Jesus God searches for and finds us. And when we are found by him, like the Father in Jesus story, God says to the angels in heaven - *'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'*