

(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/>)

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The best stories are the ones that are true. True not in so much that they record accurately historical events, but true in the sense they illustrate who we are as human beings - how the world is. We all have our favorite stories. My favorite novel is Australian author Tim Winton's Cloudstreet. My favorite film would be Shawshank Redemption.

Question: What is your favorite story?

Jesus was a story-teller par excellence. Much of his teaching took the form of parables – stories that profoundly exposed the truth about who we are as human beings and who God is. The Bible often records that people were astonished, amazed, shocked at Jesus' teaching. They had never heard anything remotely like it. And in their thousands they hung on every word.

Perhaps Jesus' most famous parable is one involving two very different sons and the Father who loved them both. Many of us know it as the story of the Prodigal Son. For two thousand years this story has spoken to people across cultures and generations. Some commentators suggest that the multi-layered meaning of the story is the best summary of all of Jesus' life, teaching and ministry. Author and pastor, Tim Keller, whose material we will be drawn on extensively through this series, says this about the story we know as The Prodigal Son:

If the teaching of Jesus is likened to a lake, this famous parable would be one of the clearest spots where we can see all the way to the bottom. (Tim Keller)

Over the next five weeks we will be plunging into the depths of this story. But before we do we need to ask ourselves some questions:

- Who did Jesus tell this story to?
- What is its context?
- What challenges, if any, was Jesus responding to?

Mary-Anne is going to read for us the setting of the story:

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."

"Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

(Luke 15:1-10)

In Australia we live in a very egalitarian culture. Compared with many places we do not have a class system. Except, perhaps, when it comes to flying! I recently flew back from the Middle East and I could not help but look on with envy at the Business Class seats, beds is more accurate, as I filed towards the back of the plane where my seat was, wedged alongside a mother with two screaming kids. As soon as we were seated the curtains were pulled separating us, the great unwashed in economy class, from the privileged few in Business Class, and the even more privileged in the rarified air of First Class which we never saw at all.

In Jesus day there was a very definite class system. In the reading we have just heard we find that Jesus was surrounded by two particular and distinct classes of people.

There are the Pharisees, a group of very religious men who were committed to studying the scriptures and living a holy and pure life. The Pharisees were very committed to understanding and applying God's law in living their lives. To help them do this, drawing on tradition and their understating of the scriptures they developed their own rules as to how one should live to please God. There were rules for everything: how you ate, how and when you worshipped, sexual relationships, how and when you bathed, what clothes you wore, what you did on the Sabbath...everything. These rules and traditions were collected in an extensive written record called the Mishnah. The Pharisees took particular pride in applying their life to keeping and upholding these traditions. They were the rule-keepers

The Mishnah has evolved and been expanded up to this day in orthodox Jewish faith. Recently I spent a Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath day of rest, in Jerusalem. In Jewish faith it is forbidden to work on the Sabbath. And so in the hotel we were staying in there was no cooked breakfast on Saturday, as there was on every other day. There was not even the usual toaster to toast your bread – a cooked breakfast and toasting bread would both involve work and breaking the rules of the Sabbath.

Our hotel was six floors high and had two lifts. On the Sabbath one of those lifts worked normally – you pushed the button and eventually the lift would come to your floor. The other lift operated according to Sabbath rules. It travelled methodically up and then down, stopping at every floor. You see, you did not break Sabbath rules by getting on the lift, but you did by pushing the button for the lift.

Religion is about keeping the rules. The Pharisees in Jesus' day were the rule-keepers.

Then there were the tax collectors and sinners. This was a motley group of outsiders, many of whom would have been shunned by Jewish culture because they had not kept the rules. If the Pharisees were the rule-keepers, sinners and tax-collectors were the rule-breakers.

Tax-collectors broke the rules by not only associating with the Roman occupiers, but by working for them.

People suffering from leprosy, or suffering long-term illness, or with a physical disability must have broken the rules to be suffering the way they did.

Prostitutes broke the rules about sexual purity.

The problem for the Pharisees is that Jesus, himself a teacher of the law, spent time with sinners – the rule-breakers. Not only did he spend time with them, he ate with them!

Are you familiar with the saying, ‘You are what you eat’?

In Jesus’ day the saying wasn’t ‘You are what you eat.’ It was, ‘You are who you eat with.’ And so if you ate with the rule-breakers, you became a rule-breaker yourself. The Pharisees were accusing Jesus of guilt by association:

The Pharisees and teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:2)

This was not an observation. It was an accusation.

For sinners and tax collectors who were used to rejection and abuse, Jesus’ radical welcome and hospitality was Good News. For many of the Pharisees it was bad news. Jesus knew what the Pharisees were thinking, he could overhear their muttering. Rather than slinking away and avoiding their accusations of questionable behavior, he stares them down with three stories about lost things being found. Actually, to be precise Jesus tells one story in three different ways. The bible says ‘*Then Jesus told them this parable...*’ There are three different scenes:

In the first a shepherd with one hundred sheep loses one. He leaves the ninety nine to go on a search and rescue mission for the lost sheep. He returns from the wilderness with the sheep on his shoulders, rejoicing as he walks.

In the second scene an unnamed woman loses one of her ten silver coins. She turns her house upside down – looks under the couch, in the bottom of the washing machine, under the bed, through the bins – until she finds it. And when she does find it, joy overflows.

The third scene a rebellious son turns his back on his Father, losing himself in a place where no-one knows him and where he can do whatever he likes. Broke and hungry he turns towards home, but before he can splutter out his excuses, his Father – the one he rejected – runs to him in open, joy-filled embrace. The lost has been found!

Three scenes telling the same story of lost things being found.

The Pharisees had a particular view of what was sinful – what was wrong in the eyes of God. A sinful person was someone who broke the religious rules. Sinful people were the rule-breakers. And rule-breakers are lost to God.

But in these three scenes Jesus goes way beyond the Pharisees definition of sin.

In Jesus day, as in ours, sheep were known as foolish animals. And so the people hearing Jesus when he spoke this parable would immediately assume the sheep was lost because of its foolishness. It did a dumb, sheep-like thing and was separated from the rest of the flock and the shepherd that protected it.

In a similar way, we all know that a coin is an inanimate object, incapable of thought and certainly incapable in itself of finding its way home.

Finally, the rebellious son finds himself lost in a far country because of his own poor choices.

The sheep is lost because of foolishness.

The coin is lost because of thoughtlessness.

The son is lost because of willfulness.

In these three scenes Jesus is challenging the Pharisees superficial view of sin – that sin is breaking religious rules. Jesus is saying that people find themselves lost – far from God – for a complex set of reasons.

Let me illustrate this a little. Many of you know that an area in my own life I struggle with is anger.

Now, I come from generations of Scottish heritage on both sides of my family. We Scots are infamous for our short fuses going right a back to the warring tribes of the Scottish highlands. Is my problem with anger genetic? Just as a sheep is hardwired to be foolish – am I hard-wired by me heritage to be angry?

I grew up in a loving, warm, Christian home with two incredible parents. But it would be fair to say that my mum especially knows how to express herself. Like most kids, we could push mum to breaking point sometimes. There were numerous times she would go red-faced with anger to the kitchen draw and rattle it, threatening us with death and destruction with the dreaded wooden spoon. Is my problem with anger the result of the few times my mother or father failed me as parents? Rather than genetics, was it my environment that failed me, like it did the coin?

Finally, do I erupt with anger purely because of my poor choices, my ill-discipline – just as the lost son made poor choices?

The fact is, usually sin (mistakes and failures) occur in our lives for a mixture of complex reasons – our foolishness, our thoughtlessness, our willfulness. Tim Keller puts the Bible's clear teaching this way:

Sin is deeply complex. It is inborn in you, it is magnified by sinful treatment, and is deepened and shaped by your own choices. (Tim Keller)

The bad news is that Jesus is pointing out to the Pharisees is that all of us, even those of us who are religious, for whatever set of reasons, are lost in our sin.

Eugene Peterson, a pastor and author has this to say:

Every congregation is a congregation of sinners. As if that weren't bad enough, they all have sinners for pastors. (Eugene Peterson)

This is the bad news. The Good News illustrated in each of the scenes is that we have a God who is engaged in a desperate search and rescue mission for that which is lost.

Like the shepherd, God risks the life of his son on a dangerous mission to bring home the one lost sheep.
Like the woman turning her house upside down, God expends all of his energy to do what it takes to find us.
Like the Father running towards his rebellious son, God runs towards us with grace, mercy and love.

The Good News in Jesus parable is that God seeks that which is lost. Many people understand religion to be humanities search for God. But the message Jesus preached gives exactly the opposite notion: We do not find God by searching hard ad long for him – God searches for and finds us. Jesus himself says:

The Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost. (Luke 19:10)

The lost sheep does not find its shepherd; the lost coin does not find its owner; the lost son does not run to his father. Religion says that if we seek long enough, if we try hard enough we will find God. Jesus says that we don't come to God- God comes to us on a stupendous rescue mission

This is Good News almost too good to be true. The people in Jesus day known as sinners knew the language of rejection. They saw people look away in the streets; they knew the feeling of shame as people crossed the street to avoid their presence. They heard the Pharisees judgmental statements and, in their heart of hearts, they believed them. So when this story in three scenes they knew they were the lost ones. But could it be true that God was seeking them? Could it be true that God throws a party, a celebration, a feast every time he finds a lost son or daughter?

When the shepherd find the lost sheep, he calls his friends and neighbors together for a party.
When the woman finds her lost coin, she calls her friends over to celebrate the lost being found.
When the Father embraces his lost son, he immediately celebrates with a feast for the whole village.

In these three scenes – in this story – Jesus is saying to the Pharisees who accuse him of eating with sinners and to the sinners who only knew rejection, not only do I eat with sinners – those who are lost – but when search for and find them , I throw a party. I celebrate their coming home! In fact, all heaven rejoices!

Some of us, because of the pain of our past, find it incredibly hard to believe that we are lovable. We have stuffed up so many time we begin to believe we are a stuff-up. We have made so many mistakes we begin to believe we must be a mistake. The Good News in Jesus' parable of a God who seeks to save us from our past sounds just too good to be true. But this is the God Jesus reveals.

Jeanette Clift-George tells a story of a rather eventful flight she experienced:

As I got on the plane I noticed a young woman with her baby. They were both dressed in white pinafores. The mother was smiling, and the little baby was saying "Dada, Dada." The little baby was darling. They sat down opposite me. Every time anybody went by, the baby would say, "Dada, Dada."

The young mother said they were going home, and Daddy was waiting for them.

Everybody was so happy, and we all enjoyed the little baby. The mother had a little Thermos with orange juice in it. She kept feeding the baby, a little fruit and then a little juice. It was a rough flight. Every time the baby cried the mother fed her a little bit more orange juice and a little more fruit.

I don't know how to get out of this story without telling you the truth. The flight was very turbulent. All of the fruit that had gone down came up. I think more came up than had gone down; I think there was more up than there was baby, and it was startling; the carpet was not in good condition. It was a mess.

Those of us on the opposite side of the aisle were not in good condition at all. We kept trying to tell the young mother it was just fine. We were handing her tissues and things. The baby was crying, and she looked awful. We couldn't cry, but we looked awful. The mother was so sorry about it.

We landed. The minute we landed, baby was fine: "Dada, Dada." The rest of us were just awful. We began to get off the plane, and we all moved very carefully. I had on a suit, and I was trying to decide whether to burn it or just cut off the sleeve. Have you ever tried to get away from something really unpleasant and it was you? Well that's the way we were. It was really bad.

I looked out of the plane, and there waiting was the young man who had to be Daddy: white slacks, white shirt, white flowers, and a little green paper. I thought, I know what's going to happen. He's going to run to that baby who now looks awful. I mean the hair and the pinafore were dreadful. He's going to run to that baby, get one look, and keep on running, saying, "Not my kid!"

As he ran to the young mother, I wouldn't say she threw the baby at him, but she did kind of leave quickly to go get cleaned up. He picked up that baby, and I watched him as he hugged that baby and kissed that baby and stroked that baby's hair. He said, "Daddy's baby's come home. Daddy's baby's come home."

I watched them all the way to the luggage claim area. He never stopped kissing that baby. He never stopped welcoming that baby back home. I thought, where did I ever get the idea that my Father God is less loving than a young daddy in white slacks and white shirt with white flowers and a green paper.

In a bad news world it is hard to believe that Good News is possible – especially when that Good News is free. Some of us look at our lives and all we see is mistakes and pain and regrets. Our mistakes hang around our neck like a noose, choking life from us. Guilt and shame weigh us down like a back-pack laden with bricks. We find ourselves trapped in destructive conversations that start with words like:

I could have...

I should have...

I would have...

If these are the conversations you have with yourself, if this is the script you constantly repeat, the message of Jesus' parable is especially for you. Jesus said to the Pharisees on another occasion:

Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I'm here inviting the sin-sick, not the spiritually-fit. (Mark 2:19)

Mike Yaconelli tells this story in his wonderful book *Messy Spirituality* (pages 45-47, 58-60):

Her name was Margaret. For almost forty years she had lived with the memory of one soul-scarring day in a one-roomed school with 25 students aged from 6 to 14. From the very first day, Margaret and her bitter, harsh teacher, Miss Garner, didn't get along. Over the years the animosity between them only worsened, until one fateful autumn day, when nine year-old Margaret's life was altered forever.

Margaret frantically raced into her classroom after a break, late again. Miss Garner was furious. 'Margaret!' she shouted, 'We have been waiting for you! Get up here to the front of the class right now!' Margaret walked slowly to the teacher's desk and was told to face the class, and then the nightmare began.

Miss Garner ranted, 'Boys and girls, Margaret has been a bad girl. I have tried to help her be responsible, but apparently she does not want to learn. So we must teach her a lesson. We must force her to face what a selfish person she has become. I want each of you to come to the front of the room, take a piece of chalk and write something bad about Margaret on the blackboard. Maybe this experience will motivate Margaret to become a better person!'

Margaret stood frozen next to Miss Garner. One by one, the pupils began a silent procession to the blackboard. One by one, the pupils wrote their life-smothering words, slowly dousing the light in Margaret's soul, 'Margaret is stupid!' 'Margaret is selfish!' 'Margaret is fat!' 'Margaret is a dummy!' On and on they went, until 25 terrible scribbling of Margaret's badness screamed from the blackboard.

Each ugly indictment cut Margaret's heart like a knife. The venomous sentences taunted her in what felt like the longest day of her life. After walking home with each caustic word indelibly written on her soul, she crawled into her bed, claiming sickness, and tried to cry the pain away. But the pain never left, and forty years later she slumped down in the psychologist's waiting room, her life still cringing in the shadow of 25 sentences. To her horror, Margaret had slowly become what the students had written....

Two long years of counseling helped her to finally extricate her from her past. It had been a long and difficult road, but today was the last meeting with her psychologist. She smiled at her counselor as they talked about her readiness to move on.

'Well, Margaret,' the counselor said softly, 'I guess it's graduation day for you. How are you feeling?' After a long silence Margaret spoke. *'I...I'm okay.'* The counselor hesitated, *'Margaret, I know this will be difficult, but just to make sure you are ready to move on, I am going to ask you to do something very difficult. I want you to go back to your classroom and detail the events of that day. Take your time. Describe each of the children as they approached the blackboard; remember what they wrote and how you felt – all 25 of them.'*

In some ways this would be easy for Margaret. For forty years she had remembered every detail. And yet, to go through the nightmare once more would take every bit of strength she had. After a long silence she began the painful description of that day. One by one, she described each of the pupils vividly, as though she had just seen them, stopping periodically to regain her composure, forcing herself to face each one of those pupils one more time.

Finally she came to the end, and the tears would not stop, could not stop. Margaret cried for a long time before she realized someone was gently whispering her name. 'Margaret. Margaret. Margaret.' She looked up to see her counselor staring directly into her eyes, saying her name over and over again. *Margaret stopped crying for a moment.*

'Margaret. You....you left out one person.'

'I certainly did not! I have lived with this story for forty years. I know every detail by heart.'

'No, Margaret, you did forget someone. See he's sitting in the back of the classroom. He's standing up, walking towards your teacher, Miss Garner. She is handing him a piece of chalk and he's taking it, Margaret, he's taking it! Now he's walking over to the blackboard and picking up a duster. He is rubbing out every one of the sentences the students wrote. They are gone! Margaret, they are gone!

Now he's turning and looking at you, Margaret. Do you recognize him yet? Yes, his name is Jesus. Look, he's writing new sentences on the board. 'Margaret is loved.' Margaret is beautiful.' Margaret is gentle and kind.' 'Margaret is strong.' Margaret has great courage.'

And Margaret began to weep again. But very quickly the weeping turned into a smile, and then into laughing, and then into tears of joy.