

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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At 1.25 pm on the 28th of April, 1988 a Boeing 737 jet, Flight 243, operated by Aloha Airlines took off from Hilo International Airport in Hawaii. The plane had undertaken a remarkable 89,090 take offs and landings. This was its 89,091 take-off.

The plane was carrying 90 passengers and 5 crew and quickly climbed to an altitude of 24,000 feet. 23 minutes after take-off there was an explosive noise in the roof of the fuselage which led to a catastrophic explosion and decompression of the cabin that ripped away much of the roof in the front section of the plane. Miraculously and with great skill the pilots of the plane were able to land plane 10 minutes later in Maui. 65 passengers were injured and one flight attendant lost her life.

Here is a picture of the plane soon after it landed.

Air crash investigators immediately began their work. The cause of the catastrophic explosion was traced to metal fatigue caused by corrosion. There was a failure of the adhesive used to seal joins in the aluminum sheets of the fuselage that allowed water to seep in.

One small crack.

One small crack in a plane that no one could see led to a catastrophic failure. Everything looked good on the outside. There was no reason to doubt the plane's air worthiness; it all looked good.

If you really want to worry, every year around the world 100 planes experience serious accidents because of metal fatigue – small, undetected cracks in the plane that can and do lead to catastrophic failure.

Jesus told a story of a Father and two sons. The 'bad son' – the younger son – rebels against his father and squanders a third of the family fortune on wild living in a far country. All the while his older brother stays home, faithfully sticking by dad and working hard. He is the good son. But after his younger brother returns, and after his Father welcomes him back with open arms into the family – the cracks that were always there start to appear and a catastrophic explosion eventuates. Let's hear what happens:

Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called a young boy and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'
(Luke 15:25-32)

The Father has welcomed home the younger son with a feast and party the whole village was invited to. The party would be a messy, raucous, joy-filled affair to which even gate-crashers were welcome. Guests would come and go – and then

come again. Food would be plentiful and the wine even more so. All of his would be accompanied by music that set the tone of the celebration.

It was the music the older brother heard as he came after a long day overseeing work in his Father's fields. Six days a week – stopping only for the Sabbath – the older brother would work in and around the family farm – ploughing, planting, tending, weeding and reaping. It was day-in, day-out work - work that a good and dutiful son would do.

Tired and hungry he could hear the music coming from the family compound and dust being kicked up by revelers as they danced. Straight away he is suspicious. Parties like the one in Jesus' story would be attended by all the adults of the village. Children would come, but would stay outside the home on the edge of the festivities. Rather than going in to find out himself – the older brother calls one of the children over to ask what is going on. It seems he is unnaturally suspicious – almost like he has a premonition about what is unfolding.

The boy confirms his worst fears – his younger brother has returned and the party is in his honor.

In Jesus' day there were very clear expectations about what the older brother's role would be at a party like this. He was expected to greet guests, to make sure the food and wine did not run out – to move around the gathering offering and receiving compliments. The oldest brother was expected to be the chief servant – the maitre de. Some commentators suggest that the norm would be that he would not even eat with the guests.

Imagine then the turmoil of emotions the older brother experiences. His younger brother left in disgrace and now returns feted with breathtaking honor offered by the Father he rejected. His younger brother had torn the family apart and now was the guest of honor at a party the likes of which the village had not seen for years. And if he as the older brother went in and joined the celebrations he would in effect be the servant of his estranged sibling – perhaps not even eating with him and the guests, but with the servants. There are a number of rude words I could use to describe the older brother's emotions. Suffice to say, he was consumed with anger and rage.

Up to this point the older brother had lived a life-time conforming to family and cultural expectations. He had done everything expected of a dutiful son. But now his well-constructed life begins to unravel – the cracks in the fuselage begin to appear and lead to devastating explosion. Consumed with anger and jealousy, he refuses to go in to the party – staying instead outside with the servants and children pacing up and down along the dusty street. This is an outrageous act of disrespect towards his Father. His absence would be noticed – everyone else was there. Eventually word reaches the Father that his oldest son is outside, refusing to come in.

The Father then does the completely unexpected. Rather than remaining inside pointedly ignoring his son's offensive act, he gets up and comes outside to plead with him to come in. This came at enormous cost to his honor. Just as he broke conventions in running to welcome his younger son home while he was still a long way-off, coming outside to plead with his son was an act of shameful humility.

Have you ever been in a shopping centre or some other public place and observed a family have a very public fight? A married couple arguing or a parent dealing with a teenaged tantrum? It is embarrassing. It is terrible and strangely compelling all at the same time. As the Father came out to plead with his oldest son, all the party guests would have trailed behind him, not wanting to miss the spectacle. The conversation that unfolded would have been repeated breathlessly for years to follow.

The younger son demonstrated his rebellion against his Father by demanding his inheritance and leaving the Father's house for the Far Country.

The older son demonstrates his rebellion by refusing to come into his Father's house.

And in refusing to come in the older brother exposes the true nature of his heart. He has stayed home, he has slaved in the fields, he has waited patiently for his inheritance not because he loves the Father, but because he loves the Father's things. In throwing an expensive party the Father was wasting his inheritance. It was his money that was being spent – or so he thought.

While the younger brother got control by taking his stuff and running away, the older brother got control by staying home and being good.

In the end, both sons are equally lost in their refusal to live in the Father's love – of loving the Father's things more than the Father.

The older brother was a rule-keeper. The younger brother was a rule-breaker.

The message of Jesus' story would have been very clear to those who first heard it. If the younger son represented sinners and tax collectors – the rule-breakers – then the older brother represented the Pharisees – the rule-keepers. Shockingly Jesus is saying that both sons and therefore both groups – the rule-keepers and rule-breakers are just as lost as each other.

Jesus is saying to religious people who pride themselves of keeping the rules, on living an upright life that they can be as equally lost as the most shameful sinner.

Younger brothers are easy to identify. They make bad choices – their mistakes are easy to see. They drink too much, have questionable sexual practices and do dumb things. Older brothers are harder to spot because they live behind a veneer of respectability. They go to church, they pray – they even read their Bible – but all out of an expectation that God owes them.

I'll let you in on a secret. Churches are full of elder brothers and sisters – or at least those who are elder-brother-ish. It is a frightening prospect. How do we know if we are like the elder brother in Jesus' story, at least in part? To check, we only need to look at what the elder brother says to his Father to uncover the true state of his heart:

Elder brothers are often consumed by **Surprising Anger**.

In Jesus' story we read that the older brother became angry when he discovered his Father was throwing a party for his wayward younger brother. It wasn't fair! His Father owed him for his dutiful obedience.

In the back of our minds we can feel the same way towards God. I have done the right thing - God should do the right thing by me. And when life doesn't turn out like we would like it we get angry and we blame God.

No-one would have known the older brother was angry with his Father until it all erupted so publicly in the street outside their home. It was an angry outburst that would have surprised them and probably him. It was anger that came from someplace deep.

Often we are not even aware that we are angry with God – we bury it deep until one day it erupts in a messy, uncontrolled spectacle.

Elder brothers live lives of **Joyless Conformity**.

The older brother says to his Father 'all these years I have been slaving for you.' He has lived in his Father's house with the attitude of a slave not a son. He has done what is required in order to get what he wants. He has lived for the Father's things not for the Father's love. The older brother was effectively saying to his Father – 'Dad, you owe me!' I'm the good son and I deserve the good things you have.

Many church going people live obedient lives not out of gratitude to God but as a way to subconsciously manipulate God. We live 'if, then' lives.

If I attend church regularly, if I pray daily, if I give my tithe, if I'm kind to people, if I avoid doing the wrong thing, or being with the wrong people – then God will bless me with the Good Life I want and deserve. If I do God a favor by being obedient, then God will do me a favor.

But the Father does not want us to live in joy-less conformity, but live out of joy-filled freedom.

As a Pastor I am struck by the fact that so many people who profess Christian faith live seemingly joy-less lives.

Sue and I once visited my cousin Lindy in West Australia. Lindy has a large brood of kids. Esther was her youngest at the time we visited. Esther was a precocious, confident, mischievous and joyous two-year old. She was cute and she knew it. Esther was a handful. One day Lindy had to discipline Esther. The bottom lip dropped, Esther's eyes filled with tears and her sunny face was all of a sudden sad. Esther lingered in this state for a while until Lindy said to her, "Esther where is your joy? Esther, where is your joy?" Esther sensing a new game, then walked around the back garden looking for her lost joy.

Sometimes as your Pastor I want to ask some of you, 'Where is your joy?' 'What has happened to your joy?'

Perhaps some of need to go on a joy-hunt like Esther.

Joy comes from being secure in the love of God and experiencing freedom in the grace of God.

Last week we defined grace as God's free gift of eternal value and infinite cost. Interesting the Greek root word for grace (Chairo) is the same root word for joy. Grace and Joy are interwoven together.

Some of us have heard about grace all our church-going days. We sing about grace. We thank God for grace. We can even define grace.

But tragically we have never experienced grace – God's free gift of love – and so have not experienced the liberating joy that is a mark of grace.

Some of us are intimately acquainted with church and Christianity but are strangers to grace.

Experiencing the grace of God will lead to deep, God-given joy in life – joy that is not dependant on our circumstances, but is a gift from God.

Elder brothers have **Compassion Deficiency**.

When the older brother continues his angry tirade against his Father he tellingly refers to 'this son of yours'. He could have said 'this brother of mine.' He won't even own his own brother. He feels superior to him.

This lack of compassion shows up in churches when we resist God's command to share the gospel with others. We make church about us, our needs, our comfort, our preferences, our songs, our traditions – rather than the church being a community of transforming power in the world. The spirit of the older brother manifests itself in us as we forget that, in the words of Archbishop William Temple, the church is the only institution that exists for the needs of those who are not its members.

Elder brothers often demonstrate **Quiet Insecurity**.

The older brother says to his Father, 'You never threw me a party!' The older brother is deeply insecure. Even though he craves his Father's things, his deeper need is the assurance of his Father's love.

Many of us live quietly desperate for the assurance that God loves us.

And so every time something goes wrong in our life, we wonder if its God punishing us.

We live with guilt that smothers life and love –and are always wondering if we can ever make amends for the mistakes we have made.

Elder brothers demonstrate **Judgmental Attitudes**.

The older brother can't believe his dad seems to be rewarding his rebellious brother with a party. He would never sleep with prostitutes and spend recklessly. He is devastated that his Father is so freely forgiving his brother.

The spirit of the older brother lives in us as we hold on to grudges, we refuse to forgive, as we judge people by the way they look, the way they speak, the color of their skin, their sexuality, their religion....

Surprising Anger
Joyless Conformity
Compassion Deficiency
Quiet Insecurity
Judgmental Attitude

These are all symptoms of Elder Brotherhood.

The fact is that religious people, good church going people like you and me, make great older brothers. This was the unmistakable point Jesus was making to the religious people of his day – the Pharisees.

While the sinners and tax collectors were seen to clothe themselves in self-indulgence, in rebellious acts like the younger brother, the Pharisees clothed themselves in self-righteousness that sought to manipulate God for their own purposes – just like the older brother.

Both the younger and older brothers are alienated from God.
But...the younger brother knew he was alienated from God. The older brother was blind to the fact.

Both the Pharisees and the Sinners and Tax Collectors are spiritually lost.
The Sinners and Tax Collectors knew and experienced this. The Pharisees hid their lostness behind a religious, respectable veneer.

The clear message of Jesus' story is that the older brother's lostness is the more dangerous of the two spiritual conditions because it is so deceptive and deadly. The younger brother knows that he needs the Father's love and so readily accepts it when it is offered. The older brother is blind to his need.

When you are sick you will go to a doctor. That's why sinners and tax collectors flocked to hear Jesus. The Pharisees were not aware of their spiritual ailment and so were prepared to die in their own goodness, dismissing Jesus as a heretic.

Jesus saw behind the mask the Pharisees wore, he saw the unseen cracks in the fuselage. He saw that their rule-keeping was dead religion. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus said this to them:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean.
(Matthew 23:27)

God does not offer us a dead religion but a living faith.
God does not offer us joy-less conformity, but joy-filled freedom.
God offers us grace – a free gift of eternal value and infinite cost.

Jesus is the master story teller. The younger brother is astonished by his Father's welcome and in his desperate circumstances accepts readily restoration to the family. The party is in his honor.

The story finishes with the younger brother inside his Father's house feasting and his older brother outside fuming. We do not know whether he comes in – whether he welcomes his Father's invitation. Kenneth Bailey, a wonderful commentator on this passage, says the ending Jesus' hearers would be expecting – and the Hollywood ending we would like would go something like this:

And he came and entered the house and joined in the music and dancing and feasting. And the two sons were reconciled to the Father.

Jesus does not offer a nice, neat, tidy ending. He leaves us with critical questions. Did the older brother come in? Was the family restored?

In offering this messy ending Jesus is inviting the Pharisees and us to answer the questions:

Will we acknowledge our lostness?

Will we accept God's free gift of grace that restores our relationship with him and each other?

In January I spent five days in Jerusalem. It is a city that is both ancient and modern. We slept in a hotel in the modern CBD of the city. The modern city of Jerusalem surrounds on all four sides the much smaller ancient city that is bordered by ancient walls. To really visit Jerusalem you must visit the old city. It would be ridiculous to visit Jerusalem and spend all your time in the modern suburbs and CBD. It is possible to visit Jerusalem but not really experience it.

Some of us have spent a lifetime in the church. We have lived in the neighborhood of grace, but have never really experienced its liberating freedom and overflowing joy. God is still a mystery and faith is just plain hard work - a habit we can't break. We are strangers to grace. Like the older brother consumed by his anger and confusion outside his Father's house we see everyone else having a great time and we just don't get it.

The Father treated both of his sons the same way. At great cost, he left his home to offer an invitation to both his sons to come in and feast with him. The young brother accepts this gift of grace. The question for us older brothers and sisters is this: Will we accept God's invitation?

Grace is always knocking at our door. Grace comes knocking in the form of the Cross. In Revelation Jesus writes a letter to seven churches, one in a place called Laodicea. It was a church that looked good on the outside, but was full of dead religion on the inside. Jesus saw past the thin, respectable veneer and issues them an invitation:

Here I am! I stand at the door and I knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. (Revelation 3:20)

We don't come to grace – grace comes to us and invites us into the presence of our Father. Will we accept the invitation?