

*(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: A Tale of Two Sons**  
**Series: The Prodigal God**  
**Date: 28 February 2010**  
**Preacher: Stu Cameron**

Last weekend we began a journey into Jesus' most famous story known commonly as the prodigal Son. It's a story of two sons and a Father who loved them both. We began by looking at the context that Jesus told the story in – discovering that Jesus was directly responding to the accusation of religious people that he was a friend of the wrong people – people known as sinners – the rule-breakers. Jesus does not defend himself against the accusation – in fact he agrees with it! Not only is Jesus a friend of sinners – people supposedly lost to God are exactly the ones that are the focus of his life.

Author and Pastor Tim Keller says that if the message of Jesus Christ is like a lake, the story of the Prodigal Son is where we can see all the way to the bottom. Today we are going to jump into the deep end as we focus on the story of the first of the two sons. By then end of my message I hope we will discover three big things:

Sin loves God's things more than God  
Repentance begins with coming to our senses  
Grace is the underserved, unmerited, unearned favor of God

First, let's hear the story as Jesus told it 2000 years ago:

*Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.*

*"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

*"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father.*

*"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 15:11-24)*

The story begins with the younger of two sons coming to his Father and asking for his share of the family estate. Some cultural background at this point is really important. In Ancient Middle-Eastern culture it was customary for a patriarch's

estate to be divided on his death between his surviving sons. The oldest son was entitled to a double portion of what the other son's received. So in a family of two sons the older brother would receive 2/3 of the estate and the younger brother 1/3. The other rule – set in stone – is that the estate would only ever be divided when the Father died, and not before.

The opening shock of this story for Jesus' audience would be this; effectively the younger son was saying to his father, 'You are dead to me! I'm not waiting for you to draw your last breath, for your body to be buried deep – I want it all and I want it now!' This was a stunning, shame-filled slap in the face for the Father. His youngest son was by his actions saying to him I love what you can give me more than you. The younger son loved his Father's things more than his father.

By his actions, the younger son was ripping apart his family – he was treating his Father as if he was dead and was walking away from his older brother. By forcing his Father into liquidating family assets – selling land and property – he was bringing down economic hardship. And all this would have been watched by the wider community, who would have been open-mouthed at the disrespect shown to the father. It was shameful. It was an incredible act of selfishness.

Let's pause the story for a moment. The first observation I would make is this: like the younger son loved the Father's things more than the Father, so too **Sin loves God's things more than God.**

Like the two sons in Jesus' story, we have been blessed by God with a range and depth of gifts -the material things we enjoy, the relationships we celebrate, the fulfillment we find in our work or vocation. It's easy for us to focus on the gifts we receive from God rather than on God himself. When we do this we fall into the sin the first of the Ten Commandments warns us against; the sin of idolatry.

We associate with the word 'idol' the gods we meet in the Old Testament like Baal, or in our day and age, statues of Buddha. But an idol need not be a statue. An idol is simply something we give love and attention to that God deserves first.

Perhaps the most dangerous idols are not the ones of foreign religions but the ones that are part of our everyday lives. You see the human heart is an idol factory – it has an incredible capacity to generate a multitude of them. Tim Keller says this:

*'(An idol is) anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you only what God can give.'* (Tim Keller, Counterfeit Gods, pg. xvii)

I can make an idol of success, comfort, money, power, and knowledge – even relationships.

We make the most dangerous idols – the ones that steal our heart from God – when we make good things into the Ultimate thing.

Let's pick up Jesus' story again. The younger son loved his Father's things more than the father. He loved his father's material wealth and the pleasure it could buy and so he could not – would not – wait until his dad died to get his hands of the cash and so he demands it NOW!

The scriptures tell us that the father divided his property between his two sons. But it's more than that. The word translated for property is the Greek word 'bios'. Does it sound familiar? Literally, and perhaps more helpfully translated, 'bios' means life. So the Father divided his 'life' between his two sons. There was an enormous cost to fulfilling the young son's request. The Father literally has to rip his life apart, to endure the agony of selling it, dividing it and distributing it. In Jesus day you families did not own the land, so much as the land owned them. Family identity was in the land. In selling the land, the Father was ripping the family's identity apart.

There is an agony the Father endures because the son loves the Father's things more than the Father.

But with the agony is also grace. You see the Father would have been well within his rights, in fact expected to reject out of hand the young son's outrageous request. He should have sent his son away with a slap across the face and shame in his

heart. The Father bears the social cost of shame and ridicule, not to mention the economic cost, in order that the son might exercise his will in leaving the family for dead. The Father bears the agony and cost of his younger son's rejection.

A key Christian doctrine is that of free will. It says that as human beings, created in the image of God, we have the God-given capacity to make our own moral choices.

To love God and others, or not.

To worship God, or not.

Having free will opens up of course the possibility that we will push aside the love God has for us and refuse to love him and others. And God bears the cost of this possibility of rejection.

I am the Father of two beautiful teenaged children. They are great kids. But being a parent of a teenager is a terrifying thing. You see they are increasingly less and less dependent on me and Sue. As they get older, as they grow – part of my responsibility as a parent is to give them more freedom to make their own choices. What is truly frightening is that they might make choices I don't like, that are not consistent with my values or hopes and desires for them. If they do this, it may feel like they are rejecting me.

If this is how I feel, imagine how our heavenly Father agonizes over the choices we, his sons and daughters, make. This is the agony of rejection the Father endures – all out of love. In the end sin is not breaking the rules. Before even breaking the rules, sin is breaking the Father's heart.

### **Repentance begins with coming to our senses**

Eventually Jesus' story tells us that the younger son finds himself as far from his family as possible.

In a foreign country, living among strangers, broke and destitute – the younger son suddenly sees through the fog of his own rebellion. He realizes what he has squandered; he recognizes that his only hope for survival is to throw himself at the feet of his Father, begging for mercy. And so he begins the long journey home, all the way rehearsing his speech.

The term the bible uses for the younger son's awakening is 'he came to his senses'. When he came to his senses, he began to turn back towards his Father.

### **Repentance begins when we come to our senses.**

How do we come to our senses? Can I suggest there are two ways? The first is through conviction. The bible tells us that God's law is written on every human heart. We know what is right and what is wrong. We find elaborate ways to suppress that knowledge, but try as we might, every now and then our conscience pricks us and we know the path we have chosen is the wrong one. Unfortunately such conviction of the heart does not always or even often wake us up. Tim Keller says very helpfully:

*The human heart runs on denial the same way a car runs on petrol.*

The second way we come to our senses is through circumstances; more often than not painful circumstances. The younger son 'came to his senses' when his money had run out, his belly was growling for food and he was covered in the shameful muck of a pig sty. His circumstances had uncovered and exposed his rebellion. Pain has a very happy knack of getting our attention.

Here is another example of someone whose sin has been exposed through painful circumstances.....

I have a sense that Tiger Woods is slowly coming to his senses. I was talking with my friend Graham Humprhis this week about this. He said:

*We come to our senses not when we see the light, but when we feel the heat.*

### **Repentance begins when we come to our senses.**

The journey towards healing and wholeness begins when we come to our senses. The journey home to our heavenly Father's open arms of love begins when we wake up to our rebellion.

Coming to our senses, repentance is not a onetime deal. Repentance is not a onetime deal because our rebellion, our sin is not a onetime thing.

The priest Martin Luther once famously nailed 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg cathedral. In the 95 theses was what he saw wrong with the church of his day, and what he believed to be the essence of Biblical Christianity. The first of those 95 theses was this:

*Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ...willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.*  
(Martin Luther)

The possibility of restoration, healing, forgiveness opens up as we begin to turn away from our sin and instead turn towards the loving arms of God. Tim Keller puts it this way:

*Repentance is the fuse that detonates the explosive power of the Father's love. (Tim Keller)*

### **Grace is the undeserved, unmerited and unearned favor of God**

After the son comes to his senses he begins the long journey home. He starts to practice his excuses. He knows it is 'do or die' time and a lot depends on his choice of words. The key to his strategy is to earn his way back into community – to pay back his debt bit by bit as a hired hand. It's the best he can expect in what is a desperate situation.

As he walked along the dusty road, his head downcast rehearsing his lines, he is astonished at a commotion ahead of him. Off in the distance, miles from home and coming towards him is the unmistakable figure of his Father running, not walking towards him. The son doesn't know what to think. Before he can fall at his Father's feet and beg for mercy, his dad is holding him up in a bear-hug, smothering him with kisses and showering him with tears of joy.

Stunned, the son pulls away and begins the lines he has memorized. This is the ticket home. Before he can finish the speech, the Father interrupts him, demanding that one of the servants clothe him with his best robe, place the family ring on his finger and kill the fatted calf for a celebration for the family and the whole village.

For his actions, the son deserves the Father's rejection; instead he receives complete acceptance.

Nothing in the rebellious son's character merits mercy; instead the Father showers him with forgiveness.

The son believes his only hope is to earn back the Father's favor; instead he is smothered with a free gift of unconditional love.

As surely as the Father smothers his son with tears and kisses of joy, he so too showers him with grace – underserved, unmerited and unearned favor.

And in the Father's love, the rebellious son is restored – fully and completely – to the family he had walked away from.

**Grace is the undeserved, unmerited and unearned favor of God.**

Here is the heart of the Christian gospel; long before we turn our face towards God in repentance, God is running towards us in loving embrace. We see this most clearly in the cross of Jesus. The Apostle Paul famously said that:

*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)*

While we were running away from God, God was running towards us.

While we turned our back towards God in open rebellion, God was turned towards us in loving embrace.

We will reflect more on the wonder of this love over coming weeks. Its love that is infinite in its height, depth and breadth – love without limits and without end.

The powerful nature of Jesus' story is that it devastatingly and accurately explains the human condition. It is universal in that all of us can find our story here. Let me explain:

I had been in Bible College for two years when I was encouraged by a minister friend to apply for the job of General Secretary of the Uniting Church in SA – effectively the CEO of the state. I thought he was bonkers, but I could not shake off the sense that there might be some crazy, God-like logic to it. So I applied. And to my shock, and the shock of many of others I got the job. It was a bizarre situation. In one day I went from being a student at college to being the College principal's boss. I was 33 years old and stepping into a role that traditionally was filled by ministers 20 years older than me. And I wasn't even ordained yet.

As is my way, I threw myself into my new role. I had a staff of 80 working for me, 300 ministers and 400 congregations to support, boards of schools and hospitals and missions that were appointed out of our office, and a rapidly growing Investment Fund that would reach 200 million dollars when I left six years later. It was heady stuff. And I loved it. I loved the fact that my gifts seemed to fit the role like a glove fits a hand. I loved the challenges and opportunities to work on the big picture. I loved that every day was different. I loved that God had given me this incredible opportunity. I had everything expect the big paycheck.

As I continued in the role there were other things I began to love. I loved the corner office. I loved the recognition and affirmation and respect my role engendered. I loved the power I got to exercise. I loved mixing with premiers and politicians and archbishops. I loved the fact that when people had a problem they picked up the phone and called me. I loved being needed. I loved being a big fish in a small pond.

In fact after a while I began to love the work I was doing for God more than God.

**Remember, sin loves the Father's things more than the Father.**

It came to a point where I had made the good thing God had given me in my job into an ultimate thing. I was as guilty of idolatry as the ancient Israelites were when they bowed down to the golden calf.

I had success in the job, but it came at a cost. It was an incredibly demanding role. Most of my life was dealing with crises small and large. I was leaving home for work at 6.30 in the morning, often not returning until late at night. I was away interstate a lot. Needless to say I was not seeing much of Sue or the kids. My diet was shocking and exercise minimal. I weighed the wrong side of 100 kilograms. Even though I was constantly tired I would regularly wake at 3am in the morning in a cold sweat worrying about some drama at work. After five and a half years it all came to a head.

I came into work one day and discovered that there was a small dispute between two of my staff. They were calling me in to referee. But I couldn't. I found myself in the office staring blankly at the wall, motionless for two hours. People knocked on my door; I pretended I wasn't there. People rang my phone; I didn't pick it up. I just felt numb. Eventually I picked up my phone and rang my friend Graham and said to him; 'I can't do this anymore.' Like the younger son, I was at my lowest point – overwhelmed by despair, hopelessness and pain. What God's still small voice and common sense had been telling me for years – that I could not sustain the pace – pain – deep pain - had managed to communicate. As hard as it was, I was coming to my senses.

My identity was not in God, but in what I did for God. As Bill Hybels put it, doing God's work was destroying God's work in me.

**Remember, repentance begins with coming to our senses.**

I walked out of the office that day and did not return for four weeks. I visited with my doctor and I began weekly meetings with a Christian Counselor. I avoided people. I still went to church, but I did the courtyard dash as soon as the benediction was announced. But slowly, by God's grace, healing and restoration came. Along the way there were some dark times. As burnt out as I was, I wondered whether I would ever have the strength to step back into leadership. I felt guilty about the people I was letting down and ashamed of the mistakes I had made. It was a very public collapse. For a while there I wallowed in a pity party where I was the only one invited.

But God's grace shone through! As I came to me senses, as my pain woke me up, God came to me with his love. In fact, I discovered God was loving me long before I came to me senses.

I was reminded again that even though I did not deserve God's love – God in his grace loved me for who I was, not who I thought I should be.

I was reminded again there is nothing in me that merits God's favor – but God pours his love into my life anyway.

And the biggest lesson of them all, that all of my good work, all of my striving, all of my straining, all of my anxious trying – none of this makes any difference to how God sees me. You see, like the younger son, I cannot earn my way into the loving arms of God. God's arms were already and always extended to me in open-armed embrace.

**Remember, Grace is the undeserved, unmerited, unearned favor of God.**

Six months after flaming out, our family moved to the Gold Coast and we began ministry here, still a little uncertain and unsure, would it work out? Would God bless our ministry? Would I make the same mistakes again?

By God's mercy, and still with a lot of mistakes, four years later I stand here, a sinner saved by grace. I love what I do – but different to five years ago, I love God even more.

You may have noticed that when I preach I often get a little emotional. A big part of that is my personality – I am an emotional guy. But even more than that, my experience as one of God’s prodigals welcomed back again and again has broken something inside me.

I am overwhelmed by the extent of God’s love for me.

I am wrecked by it.

My identity is defined by it.

I am healed, restored and renewed by God’s love.

God’s love is to my soul, what blood is to my heart.

I don’t deserve it – but it is mine.

Nothing in me merits it – but it is mine to receive.

I cannot earn it – it is a free, continuous gift.

This is a room full of prodigal sons and daughters – men and women who have loved God’s blessings more than God. We are all prodigals – the key issue is which type of prodigal we are.

Some of us are prodigals who like the younger brother have come to our senses and have been astonished by the fact that despite our faithlessness, God is faithful and receives us back into his loving arms.

Then there are others of us who are yet to be woken up by our pain or conscience. Or if we have, are so caught up in our shame and guilt, cannot believe that God would ever welcome us back, or if he does, only after we have earned His love.

To the first group I would say this; celebrate God’s love – revel in it – share it – never, ever forget it, nor take it for granted.

To the second group I pray this; that by God’s Spirit and through your circumstances – God would bring you to your senses, and by God’s Spirit you would know and then experiences the healing power of God’s love.