So if you were here last week you will know that we are starting a brand new series on how God desires for us to be transformed more and more into the likeness of Jesus. And as part of an introduction, Michael helped us look at how God is in the business of transformation and restoration. He knows the brokenness of humanity, but his plan is to restore all things, so it starts with a transformation of our lives.

And it's not just a part of our lives that God wants to see transformed, it's all of it, every aspect - from our mental health, our emotions, our finances, our time and gifts, everything. Not just in you and me, but in every person. So if we want God to transform, we have got to pray desperately for God to move. Transformation will not take place by our own efforts, it has to come from the empowering of God on our lives through the power of his Holy Spirit. Our human nature wants to cling to things that are earthly, and so it will only be a mighty working of the Spirit of God that will encourage a transforming change to take place. I've learnt regularly that my dependency must be on God's spirit, and not on my own energy. Without him, nothing is possible. So I encourage you as we work our way through these aspects of transformation, pray that God will enable these things to happen in you and around our community.

So as we start today, I want you to remember this one thing - **the closer we get to the Lord, the more time we will spend with the Lord, and the more transformed we will become**. **But the further we get from the Lord, the harder we will find it to cope with issues, and the less transformed we will be.** It seems to me that when I am distant from the Lord, I find it more difficult to know how to deal with the things of life. In Psalm 1 it says that the Lord knows the ways of the righteous, but the ways of the ungodly will perish. Now I'm sure everyone of us today would agree that we want to walk close with the Lord, but we also know the reality of this when Isaiah declares that '*All we like sheep have gone astray'*. A sheep doesn't have to be taught to wander off. It's built into them to do so. And the thing is that God relates us to sheep. So God knows that we will go astray and wander from Him. So the goal is that if I want to be more transformed into the likeness of God I've got to stay close to him to ensure I don't wander off. I'm saying those words, but I know how often I have to learn this the hard way.

So today we are going to think about how we get closer to the Lord, and if we happen to fall away from the Lord, how do we get back. And for some of you today, you might just be feeling that – you don't have that same passion and excitement with the Lord that you once had, and you want to get close again with him. So I pray that today will be of great encouragement to you as you begin the journey back to him, or maybe even for the first time.

And we are going to look at the most famous parable story told by Jesus. It's known as the story of the Prodigal Son, but in fact it's a lot more to do with how the father responds. The father's response is so unusual, but it teaches us a lot about our own walk with a loving God who loves us but doesn't want us to remain feeding the pigs. So this is a son who comes to his father and asks him to give him all that he is entitled to. And the father does exactly what the son asks of him. So the son heads off, and spends all his money on earthly pleasures. Things begin to fall apart. His pleasures are shortlived. Things go from bad to worse, and then he finds a farmer who feels so sorry for the kid, and so he hires the young boy to look after the pigs. Now that might seem like a normal farm-labourer's job, but remember that Jesus is speaking to jews. So when they hear that this boy is in with pigs, they consider this to be the most demoralising,

disgusting job ever. This is a low point for the son. He gets so desperate, that the stuff the pigs are eating looks appetising to him. And then the scriptures say that he comes to his senses, realising that his father's servants back home are eating better than him. Realising how he has failed completely, he decides to go back home and ask his father to hire him as a slave – that will be good enough for him, after what he has done to his father. And then we see the father's response.

So from this story, I want you to consider a number of things. Now I don't know where you are at this morning, spiritually. You might be so far away from God, but the amazing news is that God is one step away. You might feel that he is far away, but the good news, the Gospel says that that he's not. Maybe you are someone who knows they could be closer to God, but just in recent weeks you've lost that connection. So be encouraged, he wants you to draw close. And so here's some things to help you today :

If you want to be close to the Lord, you have to get tired of the way you are currently living.

You see in order for something to change, I have got to be fed up of the way I'm living my life. I've got to get sick and tired of being like this where God isn't featuring everywhere in me. If we don't want become sick of the status quo then there's no way of moving closer to God. And I think that's a problem with the traditional Church – it's happy to stay the way it is. We must want to get closer to God.

We've got to be hungry for God to do something new in our lives. In our reading today, in verse 14, we see that "*after the son had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in **need***". And then it says in verse 17 that he came to his **senses**. In other words, he came to a point of desperation. Something had to change. You see transformation starts here. It starts when you get desperate and hungry – I don't mean for food. But are you spiritually hungry and desperate? And if you're answer to that question is, not really, well then that's ok in once sense. Because God won't abandon you. But it's also not ok, because God doesn't want us to go stale.

God loves us so much that he will keep knocking on our door. We might spend lots of time wasting our lives, but he will still be there longing for us to open the door to him. God isn't going to force you, but he may put things in place that will help us get our attention. So if there's things that happen in your life where you feel like saying, I'm not content that things remain like this, then maybe consider listening to hear that knock where God wants you to start involving him again in your life. Jeremiah 29:13 God reminds us "*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart*". So is your heart longing for you to get closer to him?

Are you desperate for more of the Lord? Because when we do, it leads us to the next step towards spiritual transformation, and that is

We have got to own up to our sin.

The reason why we feel tired of living the way we are living and that we want change is because we realise our deep need of the saviour. And when the son came to his senses, he realises how foolish he has been. And then he admits that he has sinned against heaven and against his father. Some of us need to come to our senses this morning, and be willing to confess and repent of our sin, and to face up to the fact we have been living our life our own way. Remember that God hasn't moved away from us, but we may have

moved away and given our love to something else that isn't him. The bible has a word for this and it's called an idol. Idols are simply those things that get in the way of the Lord. It could literally be your job or your family. These things may not seem bad, but they are just things that shouldn't get first place before God. Each of us are as close to God as we choose to be, and we cannot blame anyone else for that. Like the prodigal son, we have got to repent. That means we don't stay where we are. In order to see spiritual transformation, we have got to move. We have got to run towards the Father. Some of you this morning are feeling miserable with where you are at, but what you need to do is recognise the arms of the Father that are open wide but your back is to him, and so you've got to turn around and go in the opposite direction in your life – run towards the Father. That's how David responded when he was caught in the act of adultery. He didn't just say sorry – there had to be action. Here's what he says in Psalm 51, "*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.* [2] *Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin"*.

So you don't just stay where you are, you do something. There's a transformation that takes place as you move away from those idols, repent, and move closer to the Father. And so the third step is this :

Offer yourself up to the Lord

Look what happens in our story when the son repents, verse 19 – "*I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.'* [20] *So he got up and went to his father*".

You see when our hearts move from self-centredness to God-centredness, that is transformation taking place. The Christian life is not about stagnating. If your life is no different day by day then you need to ask yourself a serious question – are you actively seeking to grow in the Lord. We have got be saying, "Lord make me a servant, make me like you, transform my life". That's an every day thing. It's a constant as you and I become more and more like Jesus. Here's what 2 Corinthians 3:18 says about transformation "*And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are* ***being*** *transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit*".

Some of us are wrongly thinking that once you believe that there is a God and that Jesus was his son, that that's it. You don't need to do anything more than that. And that is so wrong folks. That's like a little caterpillar stuck in his cocoon and never considering what his life is destined for, the glory the beauty that will be revealed through the transformation that slowly takes place. God has created us to make an impact, it's so much more than your Sunday attendance – this place is only the petrol station to be energised to go out, and say, Lord here I am. Romans 12 "*Offer yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*".

So, we've got to be fed up of the status quo, we've got to act in repentance, we've got to offer ourselves to the Lord, and then finally in your transformation, receive the love and grace of your Heavenly Father.

You know in our story, this son's father had every right to completely reject him. The son had been so selfish. But the father does something so unusual. Here's what is says in

verse 20, "*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*".

This son didn't return and have to knock on the father's door. No, the father every day would be out in the field hoping and waiting for his son to return. And when he sees his son the story says that the father ran to him, he threw his arms around him and kissed him.

Didn't he want to hear his son explain to him what had happened? No you see the father knew that the son would get himself to such a place of desperation that he would run back, realising that the father's house was the better place to be.

For some of you, you don't know how to go back to the Father today. You've walked away and you can't imagine that your Father God would receive you. Or maybe you have lived your life in the Church but the type of relationship with a loving heavenly father is quite foreign. Remember that our story tells us that our Father God is waiting with arms open wide. He runs to his son and brings him to the home to celebrate. When you return home, the God of the Universe sings over your life. Zephaniah 3:17 says he rejoices over you. The God of the universe loves you and I so much, that when we come back to him seeking to be transformed closer into his Fatherly likeness, he sings over you. Now the enemy says that God will never do that to you, but it's true, he sings over everyone who comes back to him. That's why folks this year of evangelism is so important, not just for people we know, but for us as a well if we have lost connection with this incredible God I am describing this morning – know that there's a way back.

He longs for our spiritual transformation. Some of you today might think everything is ok with your life, things are good. You come to church most Sundays but outside that you're not growing. And yet you will life is good. Please hear me – that's not enough folks. You are made for more than a good life, you are made for a transformed life. So with that transformed life, let's then be people of celebration. I honestly think that some of us leave our personalities outside the door when it comes to our worship, but as soon as the coffee is offered at the end of the worship your personality returns. A transformed church reflects a transformed people who reflect the goodness of God. That's the hope that we have to offer to our community. What an incredible witness.

For some of you your first step of transformation today is to come back to the Father. For some of you the next step is to find Christ as saviour and Lord today for the first time. If that's you please speak with me this week. For those of you that know Christ as Lord, are you walking with him? Are you close to him, because you are as close to him as you want to be. Is there something blocking that relationship – I encourage you to run home to him today. Are you desperate enough to see God move in your life and other people? Well remember it starts right now. Be encouraged – God wants all of us to come home to him and his arms are open wide. Don't be satisfied with the status quo.