

LEADER



FATHER OF MERCIES

A Lenten Retreat Guide on the Parable of the Prodigal Son

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FIRST MEDITATION

PORTRAIT OF A FATHER'S HEART

INTRODUCTION

The parable of the Prodigal Son has three main characters, not just one. And to really understand the parable, we need to look at all three, and see how they interact.

TWO WAYS TO REBEL

There is a father and two sons. The younger son rebels against his father, demands to receive his inheritance right now, and abandons the family. The older son stays faithful to his father and to the family, at least in his outward behavior. He is responsible and dutiful, obediently helping his father take care of their estate. He seems to have it all together.

But when his younger brother repents of his sins and humbly returns home asking for forgiveness, the older brother shows another side of his personality. Instead of happily welcoming the prodigal son and joining in the celebration, he stays aloof. He refuses to share the joy of his father and the rest of the household. In fact, he feels offended that there is a big celebration to welcome his brother home, because no one had ever organized a celebration for him, and he was the one who had stayed faithful.

The younger son rebelled first, but the older son also rebelled; he just did it later and for a different reason. Both of them rejected their father.

THE OBVIOUS REBELLION

And this is the first point that should make us pause and reflect. There are different ways to put up obstacles to an intimate, trusting relationship with God. Which way do we tend to do it?

Are we like the younger son, who rebels violently, in a sense, going off and sinning in obvious ways?

Biblical commentators point out the significance of where this type of outward rebellion led the younger son. In the end, he became a worker at a pig farm. For the Jews, pigs were unclean animals. Being reduced to working with pigs in order to earn barely enough to just keep surviving,

then, is the lowest point imaginable for the people Jesus was speaking to. These sins of carnal pleasures and over-indulgence had led this young man to lose his dignity, to become little better than the pigs he tended.

That was the experience of the “tax collectors and sinners” who were drawing near to Jesus to hear him preach, as St. Luke points out right before he inserts this parable in his Gospel.

When we fall into obvious and obviously destructive sins, like gluttony, envy, anger, lust, and sloth, we have the same experience. We acutely feel that we are acting against our true dignity, our true identity as children of God, created in God's image, members of God's household. We can feel deeply ashamed and discouraged when we face up to these behaviors.

THE SUBTLE REBELLION

The rebellion of the older brother was very different. It wasn't obvious and shameful; it was much more subtle. Outwardly, he was obeying all the rules and doing his job on his father's estate. But inwardly he had mixed motives. In a certain sense, he was trying to earn his father's approval and praise. This comes out clearly in his reaction to the celebration that his father organizes when the younger son comes home.

Instead of joining that celebration, the older brother stays outside, angry and resentful. And here is how he explains himself:

“Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.”

—Luke 15:29–30

With this complaint, the older brother reveals his heart. He shows that all of his obedience and faithfulness flowed from a desire to earn his father's appreciation. And when he sees his father show abundant appreciation to his younger brother, who had done nothing at all to earn it, he gets mad.



Sometimes we do the same thing. Sometimes we live our relationship with God as if it were some kind of a contest in which we could win holiness and happiness by performing better than other people. If you have ever fallen into this pattern, you know how fruitless it is. Instead of leading us to the peace and joy of intimacy with God, it leads us to a kind of spiritual anxiety. Our hearts, instead of expanding and overflowing with grace and love, become worried, constricted, and harsh. We can even start judging and condemning other people, and maybe even resenting God himself.

That's what happened to the older brother, and that's what was happening to the Pharisees, which is why Jesus was telling them this parable.

GETTING TO KNOW THE FATHER

Most of us can relate to both brothers. We have had our moments of obvious rebellion, and we have had seasons of the more subtle rebellion. In both cases, the real root of the brothers' sins can be traced back to a distorted idea of their father. Neither one of them really understood their father's heart. And it was only through the father's reaction to their rebellions that they discovered it. Let's look at that reaction.

In the first place, St. Luke points out the father's reaction to the younger son's return home:

So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.

—Luke 15:20

What's most striking is the phrase, "while he was still a long way off, the father caught sight of him." This implies that the father was still looking for his son, still hoping for his return, still longing to be reunited with him. We can even picture the father going up onto his rooftop or balcony each day and gazing down the road that his son had taken when he left, yearning to see him again.

The father never stopped loving his son. Even his son's insulting, violent rebellion couldn't obstruct that love. In a sense, the younger son really didn't deserve to be welcomed home, which is why he tells his father:

Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.

—Luke 15:21

But the father doesn't care about that. Instead, he dresses his son in the finest robe, and puts a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet—all of which are symbols of the young man being fully reinstated in his original place of honor in the family.

This is a portrait of mercy, of a father whose love is not calculating and conditional, but abundant, redeeming, and unstoppable.

"EVERYTHING I HAVE IS YOURS"

The father's reaction to the older son's rebellion is similar. Here is how St. Luke describes it:

He [the older brother] became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him.

—Luke 15:28

Once again the father takes the initiative to reach out to his alienated son. He doesn't care that his son is acting selfishly and harshly—he can't stand to be separated from him, so he goes out to meet him, to plead with him.

And after hearing the older brother's complaint that no one had ever organized this kind of celebration for him, the father says to him:

My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours.

—Luke 15:31

In other words, the father tries to make him understand that he didn't have to earn his father's love and appreciation—in fact, nothing he could do would win or lose that love.

This encounter too, like the one with the younger son, is a portrait of merciful love, of love that doesn't calculate and grudgingly measure itself out in little doses—it is abundant, redeeming, unstoppable.



CONCLUSION: OUR FATHER OF MERCIES

That is the father's heart. And if either son had been able to recognize it, they could have avoided all their misery and suffering, all their dissatisfaction and resentment; they could have lived constantly in the joy of intimate union with their father and of the prosperity of his household.

The father's heart in the parable is a portrait of God's heart, of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Our God too is a father of mercies. In telling us this parable, Jesus wants to convince us of that. Will we let him?

Let's take some time now to read over St. Luke's narration of this amazing story, and to listen to what God wants to say to each one of us through its inspired words. The questions after the biblical passage may help your meditation.

THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON

The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to him, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." So to them he addressed this parable ... Then he said, "A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So the father divided the property between them. After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. Coming to his senses he thought, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers."'"

—Luke 15:11–19
NABRE

So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced

him and kissed him. His son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son." But his father ordered his servants, "Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found." Then the celebration began.

—Luke 15:20–24
NABRE

Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. The servant said to him, "Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound." He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. He said to his father in reply, "Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf." He said to him, "My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found."

—Luke 15:25–32
NABRE

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Which of the two brothers can I most relate to right now in my life? Why?
2. When I have experienced most intensely the merciful love of God, who is always coming out to meet me whenever I am separated from him? Remember, savor, and thank God for those experiences.
3. What fears and anxieties do I still struggle with? How can a deeper knowledge of and faith in God's abundant, unconditional love for me help me deal with them?



SECOND MEDITATION

THE JOY OF MERCY

INTRODUCTION

The Gospel passage of the Prodigal Son appears in the Church's liturgy on the Fourth Sunday of Lent. In the liturgical calendar, that day is known as "Laetare Sunday."

"Laetare" is a Latin word that means "rejoice". Midway through our Lenten journey towards Christ's Passion and Resurrection, the Church invites us to rejoice, and it offers this parable to help us do so.

THE DIFFERENCE OF CHRISTIAN JOY

What is Christian joy? Joy in general is a feeling of contentment or satisfaction that we get when we come into the possession of something good—even simple material goods like brownies and basketball championships can give us a brief experience of joy. This feeling only lasts as long as we have the good thing. It goes away when we lose the good thing, when it wears out, or when we get tired of it, in which case it is no longer a good thing for us.

Since all the good things of this earth wear out, and since we end up getting tired of them all (just think about how quickly we get used to new toys from Christmas), no earthly joy can really last. They all disappear.

But Christian joy is different. It is the possession of the one good thing that can fully satisfy our hearts, so we never get tired of it. It is the possession of the one good thing that doesn't change, so it can never wear out, never break, and never go away.

What is this one good thing that makes Christian joy possible? It is God's mercy, his loving attention and unconditional, unlimited commitment to us.

God is always paying attention to us. He can't stop thinking about each one of us.

And because God is all-knowing and all-loving, while he pays attention to us he is knowing us and loving us, through and through—no matter what; regardless of whether we deserve it or not; his merciful love for us never wears out and never stops, just like the father with his two sons in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

That is precisely the good thing that our heart aches for more than anything else, because that's what it was made for: to be known and loved through and through, in spite of our weaknesses and failures and wounded-ness and sins. So whenever we turn our attention to God we can see him, with the eyes of faith, paying merciful attention to us, knowing and loving us without limits, and that fills us with a joy that never has to wear out.

It's worthwhile reflecting on this deep connection between God's inexhaustible mercy and the potential that we have for living with inextinguishable joy. If this truth of our faith really penetrates our mind and heart, it can transform our entire outlook on life: we are loved, personally, no matter what, at all times, without limit—so what could we possibly have to be afraid of or anxious about?

THE ELOQUENCE OF A PALLADIAN CHURCH

One of my favorite church buildings illustrates this magnificent truth of our Christian faith. It was designed by Andrea Palladio, a great architect of the Italian Renaissance, who lived and worked in Venice, Italy.

Perhaps his most famous building is the Church of San Giorgio Maggiore. It is located on an island in the Venetian lagoon, facing the magnificent center of the ancient city, in St Mark's Square. From the mouth of the Grand Canal, looking out into the ocean, you see rising before you the gleaming white limestone facade of Palladio's church.

The interesting thing about this facade is how it changes colors with the seasons, the weather, and the times of day. It is angled just right, so that it is almost always catching the rays of the sun. It rests right on the edge of the island, so the shimmering surface of the water reflects another source of light onto the facade. The pure white limestone, therefore, takes on many different hues. Sometimes it radiates a light blue, almost silver tint. Other times it gleams with an early morning pink or lavender sheen. Sometimes it shines brightly with the deep red of a Mediterranean sunset. But no matter the weather, no matter the color of the light, the strong, elegant lines of the Church are always the same, consistently communicating the message of beauty, goodness, and hope in whatever hue the light happens to paint it.



That's what Christian joy is like. The troubles of the world shine their various lights on us, but our friendship with Christ, firm and unshaken, turns them all into something beautiful. We are new creations, living temples filled with the unshakeable love of an infinitely merciful Father, and so our joy doesn't come from fickle exterior circumstances, but from an internal reality of faith that never wavers—this is the everlasting joy of mercy.

CONCLUSION: RENEWING OUR EXPERIENCE OF MERCY AND JOY

Most of us, if we're honest, have to admit that life's troubles often seem to obscure our joy instead of giving it a chance to shine. If that's the case, we need to refresh our friendship with Christ, the source of Christian joy. And the best way to do that is to renew our experience of God's mercy, of his unbreakable love for us.

For that, we may need to face up to the uncomfortable fact that we have not always been so unbreakably faithful to him, ask forgiveness, and renew our commitment to be more faithful in the future.

Since Christ's love for us is personal and total, even our small infidelities sadden him. Whenever we ignore the teaching of his Church, whenever we ignore the voice of conscience, whenever we fail to forgive, whenever we fail to love our neighbor as ourselves, we sadden our Friend, Christ, who only wants the best for us. We put distance between him and us, just as the two sons in the parable put distance between themselves and their father. That distance can suffocate our experience of Christian joy.


There is an easy way to come back to the Father's house, to take that distance away and make a fresh start in our friendship with Christ. And it's something we can do as many times as we need to. We can go to him in the sacrament of confession, the sacrament of rediscovered joy.

In the conference, we will look a bit more closely at how each of us can spread the joy of mercy. But for now, let's just take a few moments in the silence of our hearts to turn our gaze towards God and see him paying attention to us. Let's ask him to give us a new experience of his goodness, to convince us more than ever before that his merciful love can be our ever-flowing internal fountain of Christian joy. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.


QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How firmly and deeply do I believe that God loves me without limit, with a warm, personal, merciful love? What difference does this faith make in my daily life? What difference would I like it to make?
2. What circumstances of life tend to steal my interior joy? Why? What does God want to say to me about those circumstances?
3. In general, how would I describe my attitude towards the sacrament of confession? How would I describe Jesus' attitude towards it? If there is a difference, where does it come from?

THREE QUOTATIONS TO HELP YOUR MEDITATION

 *Brothers and sisters: Whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.*

—2 Corinthians 5:17–21
NABRE

 *I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall be always in my mouth. My soul will glory in the Lord; let the poor hear and be glad. Magnify the Lord with me; and let us exalt his name together. I sought the Lord, and he answered me, delivered me from all my fears. Look to him and be radiant, and your faces may not blush for shame. This poor one cried out and the Lord heard, and from all his distress he saved him. The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he saves them. Taste and see that the lord is good; blessed is the stalwart one who takes refuge in him ... The righteous cry out, the Lord hears and he rescues them from all their affliction. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted, saves those whose*



Lined writing area for notes, consisting of two columns of horizontal lines.



CONFERENCE

SPREADING THE JOY OF MERCY

INTRODUCTION

The deepest need of every human heart is to be loved and to love. And since sin damages love, only God's mercy given to us through Christ, who forgives sin down to its very roots, can fulfill our deepest longings and give us true joy.

Here is how St. John Paul II put it in his very first encyclical letter:

Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it. This, as has already been said, is why Christ the Redeemer "fully reveals man to himself". If we may use the expression, this is the human dimension of the mystery of the Redemption. In this dimension man finds again the greatness, dignity and value that belong to his humanity. In the mystery of the Redemption man becomes newly "expressed" and, in a way, is newly created. He is newly created!

—Redemptor Hominis, 10

If you are watching this Retreat Guide, you have probably already experienced, at least to some extent, the redeeming power of God's merciful love. But think about all the people who have not experienced it, who don't even know about it. Think about how different their lives would be if they knew—really knew—that they were loved infinitely, mercifully, personally, everlastingly by their Creator and Redeemer. And then think about how different this world would be if more people experienced and believed in that love—think about how much more goodness, courage, peace, wisdom, and joy there would be.

AMBASSADORS OF CHRIST'S MERCY

As Christians, one of our main missions in this world is to spread the Good News of God's merciful love, to help people experience it for the first time, or rediscover it if they have lost their way.

And in another one of God's amazing providential gifts,

the more we spread that good news to others, the fresher it stays in our own minds and the more fully we benefit from it ourselves. As Jesus said, "There is more joy in giving than receiving" (Acts 20:35).

St. Paul describes this great mission that we all share in one short phrase. He writes to the Christians in Corinth to tell them:

So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us.

—2 Corinthians 5:20

Ambassadors for Christ, messengers of God's redeeming and merciful love, bearers of the greatest gift that any human being can ever receive: the sure knowledge that they are loved with a limitless love, no matter what. That's part of who we are as followers of Christ.

God has sent us out into the world the way leaders of countries send out ambassadors to other countries, to be his representatives, his messengers. Christ has given each of us the power to speak in his name: to announce the "good news of great joy" (as the angels described it to the shepherds on Christmas night) to all the prodigal sons around us, wherever they may be found: at the office, at school, on our streets, in our own families. We have been entrusted with the message that the Father is waiting for them with open arms, that God's forgiveness is real, that life can have meaning and true, everlasting joy.

ALTERNATIVE ENDINGS

Have you ever wondered how the parable of the Prodigal Son would have ended if the older brother had been a better brother? Think about it for a moment.

The younger, rebellious son abandons his father. The father has to respect that. He can't force the young man to love and trust him. He can't go out and try to force his son to come back home. He can only wait, hoping that the son will have a change of heart and return.

But the older brother doesn't have to wait. He doesn't have to be passive. If he had really cared about his father and his little brother, instead of just caring about himself,



he would have gone after him. He would have done more than just criticize and judge him. He would have at least made one or two trips to go and search for him.

We can imagine the conversation they would have had if the older brother had found him at the pig farm. The older brother might have said something like, “We miss you, and we would love for you to come back.” The younger brother might have answered, “But how can I, when what I did was so horrible?” “Don’t worry,” we can imagine the older brother saying, “just come back—trust me, we’ll work it out. You don’t have to stay here eating corn husks anymore ...”

How much joy that simple effort (even if it had been unsuccessful) would have given his father! How much of a help it might have been for his brother! And how much meaning and fulfillment it would have given himself!

Each one of us is surrounded by innumerable younger brothers who are lost and sorrowful—the world is full of people who have wandered far away from the father’s house and are miserable, not knowing where to turn or how to come back to their true dignity. It is not so hard to open the eyes of our hearts to see them. How easy it would be to invite them back to the Father’s house to experience God’s mercy, and how much joy it would spread!

WINNING THE RAFFLE

To share the good news of God’s mercy is really not so hard as we might think. I read about an incident that occurred a few years ago which illustrates how easy it can be.

Jim and Thomas were youth group members at a parish in the Midwest. They were chosen to deliver the prize (a food basket) to the winner of their Parish Rosary Society’s Lenten fundraising raffle. They called the phone number eleven times. No answer. The raffle organizer suggested making another drawing. But Thomas wanted to keep trying. He and Jim decided to drive the food basket to the address on the raffle ticket. The address led them through the snowy streets to a run-down apartment building in the poorest side of the city.

They climbed the stairs and knocked on the door. No answer. They knocked again. Still no answer. They waited, knocked again, waited some more. Finally, they got back in the car and started to drive away, but a strange feeling came over Jim and he turned the car around. “We’re gonna try one more time,” he said. Thomas didn’t argue.

This time, their knock was answered by a young woman holding a tiny baby. She opened the door and invited them into the shabby apartment. They sat down on the worn-out sofa. As Jim explained the raffle, congratulated her and presented her with the food basket, Thomas noticed that the apartment was filled with a funny smell. His eyes wandered over to the little kitchenette. He saw that the floor was wet. Then he saw a lighter near the sink, and a gas can leaning against the wall. Just then Jim finished his congratulations speech. Suddenly, the young woman held her baby very close, and burst out crying.

She pressed her head to her baby’s and mumbled through the sobs, “I was going to do it; I thought nobody cared.” Jim and Thomas, Christ’s ambassadors, had showed her that God cared, simply by making a little extra effort to deliver the food basket. God used that small, self-sacrificing effort to bring his redeeming, merciful love to the heart of someone who had given up hope.

CONCLUSION: LIVING OUR MISSION

We are all Christ’s ambassadors. We all have received the mission to spread the message of Christ’s tireless mercy and in so doing to spread the transforming power of Christian joy. We are all called to go and visit the prodigal brothers whose lives intersect with ours. We are all called, now and then, to knock on a neighbor’s door just one more time. In a sense, we are called to be a manifestation of God’s mercy for others. That’s part of what it means to be an ambassador for Christ.

In us, through our words, actions, and example, God wants others to be able to discover what we, at least in part, have already discovered and come to believe in: the infinite depths of God’s merciful love. That discovery will help bring them into friendship with Jesus and spark an experience of Christian joy. This Lent, we should renew our commitment to fulfill this mission, to be Christ’s ambassadors—consciously and actively.

One easy way to do this is simply to go out of our way for someone every day this Lent, to give God’s mercy a little more space to work in people’s lives.

We can go out of our way to help someone in little things, like giving up the better parking space, or taking time to actually find information for someone instead of just pointing them to the website, or, like Jim and Thomas, putting extra effort into fulfilling our normal duties.

We can also go out of our way to help someone in bigger



things, like taking the family to visit a sick relative in the hospital or the nursing home, or inviting the new family in the neighborhood over for a welcome dinner, or volunteering our most precious resource, time, to reach out to others in need.

We can also go out of our way simply to listen to people, to take someone out for a cup of coffee and give them an open ear, to let them know that they really do matter. A conversation like that can so easily become a channel of grace. When we humbly go out of our way for someone we can show forth some of God's mercy and goodness. If each one of us makes this resolution, during this Lenten season God will be able to reach out through us to thousands of prodigal sons and daughters who may be afraid to come home to the Father's house, who may be thinking that nobody cares. Take some time now to prayerfully reflect on the questions in the personal questionnaire, which are designed to help equip you to be better and better ambassadors of the joy of mercy.

PERSONAL QUESTIONNAIRE

1. When have I directly experienced God's mercy in a personal way? What effect did it have on me? Savor that experience and thank God for it.
2. When has another person been a messenger of God's mercy and love to me? Remember that experience, savor it and thank God for it. What can I learn from that experience?
3. How would I explain in my own words the connection between the meaning of life, love, mercy, and joy?
4. Pope Francis often said that God never gets tired of forgiving us, but we sometimes get tired of asking him for forgiveness. Why is that?
5. When I read St. Paul's phrase, "We are ambassadors for Christ," how does it make me feel? Why?
6. When was the last time someone went out of their way to help me, even in a little way? How did it make me feel? Why?
7. When was the last time I went out of my way for someone? How did it make that person feel? How did it make me feel? Why?
8. Read the following quotation from Pope Benedict XVI. How does it apply to my life?

Now, someone might ask: is it legitimate to be so happy when the world is so full of suffering, when so much darkness and such great evil exist? Is it legitimate to be so confident and joyful? The answer cannot but be "yes"! Because in saying "no" to joy we render no service to anyone, we would only make the world darker. And anyone who does not love himself is unable to give anything to his neighbor, he cannot help him, he cannot be a messenger of peace. We know this from faith and we see it every day: the world is beautiful and God is good. And because he became man and came to dwell among us, because he suffered and lived with us, we know once and for all, and every day: yes, God is good and it is good to be a person. We live from this joy and starting from this joy we also try to bring joy to others, to repel evil and to be servants of peace and reconciliation ...

—Pope Benedict XVI
Bavarian Evening Address, 3 August 2012

9. Read the following quotation from Pope Francis. How does it apply to my life?

There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter. I realize of course that joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved. I understand the grief of people who have to endure great suffering, yet slowly but surely we all have to let the joy of faith slowly revive as a quiet yet firm trust, even amid the greatest distress ...

—Pope Francis
Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, 6

10. St. John Paul II once said, "True joy is a victory, something which cannot be obtained without a long and difficult struggle. Christ holds the secret of this victory ... It is by walking with Christ that we can achieve joy, true joy!"^[1] How is my "walking with Christ" going at this moment in my life's journey? What one thing could I do to improve it the most during this Lent?

[1] St. John Paul II, *Welcoming Ceremony for World Youth Day in Toronto*, 25 July 2002



FURTHER READING

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

- *Jesus of Nazareth, Part I (Chapter 7)*
by Pope Benedict XVI
- *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*
by Henri Nouwen
- *I Believe in Love*
by Jean D'Elbee

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