

- Have you ever considered what gives God great joy?
- Of course, our Gospel today offers us an answer as Jesus speaks of the importance of repentance. Jesus tells us today of the shepherd's great joy in finding his lost sheep, and how Heaven rejoices more over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people.
- Our Lord also gives us a powerful image of how our Heavenly Father exalts in the repentance of His sinful children through the familiar parable of the Prodigal Son.
- It's a magnificent image: as the repentant son makes his way back to his father in order to do penance, the father, who spies him from a long way off, is filled with compassion and runs to his son, embraces and kisses him.
- The repentant prodigal son barely utters his confession of sins again the father, and the father is showering him with gifts: the finest robe, a ring on his finger, new sandals, and a feast with the fattened calf.
- All of this is symbolic, of course, of the way God the Father views us when we repent. Our repentance moves our Lord to compassion and joy, He gifts us with His grace and mercy, and we are allowed once again to feast on His Son's body and blood.
- God's mercy is such that He welcomes sinners with a love and compassion that is scandalous to Pharisees and those who are quick to judge sinners. Yet God cannot resist a humble and contrite heart.
- The joy of seeing our humble repentance induces God to pour out His mercy upon us.
- We hear of this in our second reading as St. Paul extolls the mercy he's received because of his humble recognition of how sinful he was before his fateful trip to Damascus. Indeed, our repentance gives God great joy!
- This is especially true when our contrition for our sins is based solely on our love for God – rather than being a bi-product of our fear of hell. This is the distinction between what we call perfect and imperfect contrition.
- Our contrition is *perfect* only when we are sorry for our sins because we know that our sins have offended God, Who is all good and deserving of all our love.
- Our contrition is *imperfect* when it springs from our dread of the loss of Heaven and our fear of the pains of hell. While imperfect contrition is enough for us to gain God's mercy, it's generally not as long-lasting as perfect contrition, nor is it as pleasing to God.
- For God – being Love – desires to be loved by His creatures. He wants all our actions to be rooted in our love for Him, for remember: the first and greatest commandment is that we love God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength.
- Thus, it's important that we make loving God our highest priority, for if we truly love God as we should, then perfect contrition for our sins will be something that naturally develops within us.
- When we truly love someone, we feel compunction whenever we do something that hurts or offends them. And the same is true in our relationship with God. Of course, the greater our love for God, the more perfect our contrition will be when we do sin.
- We see this so clearly in the lives of the saints. St. Paul is a perfect example. St. Paul admits that he was the foremost of sinners, being a zealous persecutor of the Church before Christ appeared to him and corrected him.

- Amid the blindness that ensued after his experience on the road to Damascus, Paul's eyes were opened to his sinfulness, and his heart was opened to God's love and mercy. As the scales fell from his eyes, St. Paul knew his life had to be dedicated to Christ.
- Moved by a great love for God, St. Paul heroically suffered terrible hardships and indignities in his ministry. Yet the more he suffered, the more his love for God grew.
- Now most of us are not called to the great acts of heroism of someone like St. Paul. Most of us are called to love God through the daily events of our rather uneventful lives.
- But all the same, as an insignificant acorn eventually grows into a mighty oak, so too is great and heroic love for God born out of our small, daily acts of love for Him.
- The greater teacher of this within our Church is St. Thérèse of Lisieux, whose "Little Way" shows us how to grow in great sanctity simply by doing all things, even the most mundane and simple tasks, with a great love for God.
- Yet, simple as it sounds, loving God as we should isn't always easy, is it? How many of us have desired to love God, but find ourselves at times still lukewarm in our love for Him? How many of us struggle to turn away from the world to seek God's Kingdom?
- The problem is that, like the Israelites of old, we can be a stiff-necked people, holding fast to our golden calves that we think will make us happy.
- This is precisely why our Lord tells us that we cannot serve both God and mammon! We cannot allow worldly goods to compete with God for our love and attention.
- So as we consider today's readings, we must ask ourselves what it is that keeps us from loving God perfectly. What is our golden calf? What, aside from God, do we worship?
- Keep in mind that our golden calf may not be a material thing, but an idea or even a sin that we refuse to relinquish.
- In today's world of moral relativism, lots of folks who come to Mass and receive the Sacraments, but presume to practice the Faith on their own terms – living lives that do not comport with the moral teachings of the Church, especially re: 6th commandment.
- They are like Prodigal children who have returned to the father, but with their prostitutes in tow. They want God's mercy, but they refuse to give up their sin. They want the benefits of the Faith, but not the responsibility of practicing it fully.
- The problem is that when we refuse to follow the authentic teachings of the Church, we cut ourselves off from God's mercy. The father doesn't rejoice at the Prodigal Son's return if he hasn't left his sins behind through repentance.
- Yet, when we do repent, when we let go of our golden calves so that we might worship God alone in integrity and truth, then He receives us back to Himself just like the father of the Prodigal Son – gifting us beyond measure and forgetting our iniquity.
- Brothers and sisters, what are your golden calves? What keeps you from loving God as you should? In what ways do you fail to practice your Faith with integrity and authenticity? From what sins do you still need to repent?
- Knowing that our repentance brings our Lord great joy, may we turn aside from the mammon of this world and find our joy only in Him.
-