

1. My title is the single word joy. What we learn in this lesson is that God Himself can experience joy. If we think of God as being perfect, then He doesn't need anything. Therefore my question is, how and why does God experience joy? The answer is, it is His nature to express love upon something and He's chosen us, who are called to serve Him to express that love upon. Therefore when someone makes the effort to turn to Him, it literally brings God joy. Ok, I'm glad that God can experience joy. What does it have to do with me? Glad you asked.
 - a) It's probably best if I define the word joy as I use it. When I think of happy, I think of one being in a situation where something good happens. If we just received a large amount of money we didn't expect that event would make us happy for a bit. When I think of joy, I think of being in a good mood no matter what is the situation. The Hebrew concept of joy literally means to jump up and down with excitement over something. That gets me back to my view of God, who I would argue knows all things by definition. Since God is filled with love, then it would fill Him with joy to realize people are willing to turn to Him even if He's aware they were going to do it in the first place. For believers, it means He's going to express His love and His joy upon us for all of eternity.
 - b) That leads me to the question of, "How do we experience joy?" We may have a great day today or we may be dealing with a hard problem. The idea of joy is to have peace in our lives no matter what the situation. It is to realize that God cares about our lives and wants to spend eternity with us. That thought should bring us joy no matter what the situation. What I'm getting at is that since that God expresses joy, so should we. If we believe we're going to spend eternity with God and He loves joy, we should want what He wants. God wants us is to be filled with joy, so we can share that joy with others. On that thought, let me talk about this chapter and how it expresses' God's joy He wants for us.
2. Chapter 15 is essentially three stories that are all designed to teach us about what brings God joy. While each story is unique, each ends with someone experiencing joy. Jesus gives us three stories that just about anyone can relate to, to explain God's joy. With that said, let me now describe the three stories in this chapter:
 - a) The first is about a man who has 100 sheep. One of the sheep is lost. The man leaves the 99 sheep to look for the lost one. The man carries the sheep home on his shoulders, so he can be sure that sheep returns with the others. This parable shows the lengths that God will go to rescue someone He's called to use their (our) lives to serve Him.
 - b) The second story is about a woman who had 10 silver coins. One got lost. After searching her house, she finds it. She then has a celebration with her friends over the found coin as she's filled with joy over what was lost, now being found.
 - c) The final story is one of the most famous in the bible. It's about the prodigal son. To sum it up quickly, a man had two sons. His youngest son wanted his share of his father's stuff now, while the father was still alive. The father, out of love for his son, agreed to give the portion of the father's estate that would be his after his father died. The son then goes out and blows his inheritance fairly quickly. The prodigal son then returns home asking to be a servant for his father. The father, full of joy over the return of his lost son, throws a big party to celebrate his son's return.
 - i) The story also explains about the older son who never lost his share of the father's estate as the older son faithfully served his father. The point about the older son is that those of us who are already called to serve God, should express joy ourselves when we see others willing to commit their lives to serving Him. The idea is about not being jealous over God's generosity and faithfulness, but learning to have joy in other's salvation as well as having joy in our own salvation.

- d) That, in effect is the whole chapter. Three relatively short stories all dealing with the issue of how to have joy in life. If you haven't figured it out by now, the point of these stories is not just to learn the fact that God has joy, but to learn how we can and should have joy in our own lives. Therefore, if you are interested in having more joy in your life, I invite you to read the rest of this lesson. With that said, let's get started on the details.
3. Chapter 15, Verse 1: Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him.
- ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."
- a) I did promise that the whole chapter is three stories about joy. Verses 1 and 2 are simply describing where and when Jesus told the three parables (made up stories) to describe to us how and when God experiences joy.
 - b) In order to explain why these stories are here, let's back up and remind ourselves where we left off in Luke's Gospel. I called the last chapter "invitations" as it involved a number of stories of Jesus describing being invited to functions and it ended with Him describing who is and who isn't invited to be with God forever in heaven. If Chapter 14 describes for us who's invited to be with God forever, then think of Chapter 15 as asking the question, "What's in it for God? What does He get out of inviting people to be with Him forever?" The answer of course is joy, and we'll get into that in this lesson.
 - c) That idea leads me back to these two verses. The setting of the story tells us of God's joy here in this chapter is in front of a large group of Jewish people. Among that group are both devoutly religious Jewish people: Pharisee's, a religious sect of Judaism and those who were teachers of the law. These were experts among the experts in interpreting how one should obey God's laws. The others present at this gathering were "tax collectors and sinners". Those who made a living in Israel as tax collectors were thought of as traitors to their own country as they worked for the hated Romans. They were also considered low-life's as they were known for stealing and strong-arm tactics in order to collect those taxes. Finally we have "sinners" which is a term religious Jewish people used to describe fellow Jewish people who did not take their religion seriously.
 - d) One has to get the idea that the religious Jews would not even "waste their time" teaching God's laws to the non-religious as they figured it was a waste of time. They based a lack of respect for non-religious Jews on biblical proverbs based on who are and who are not the "foolish" and who they should not reach out too for salvation.
 - e) The reason I'm giving all of this background is to understand that Jesus spent most of His time reaching out to the non-religious. Consider that Jesus had no Pharisee's among His disciples. Jesus appealed to those who didn't care for the religious establishment as those sinners and tax collectors loved to hear Jesus put down the religious leaders. To state the obvious, of course Jesus wanted all of these people to obey the law, but not at the expense of not caring for people. My point is Jesus wants to experience joy. The greatest way to experience joy is to make a difference in other's lives, as we observe them being drawn to God, not because of our great witnessing ability, but only because that's the power we're given as believers. My point is Jesus is teaching us in this chapter that God provides for us the power and pleasure (joy) of leading others to Him. Just as God has joy in people repenting to turn to Him so God wants us to have joy in seeing others draw closer to Him.
 - i) What I'm getting at here, is that God experiences joy in people's salvation as they draw closer to Him, and we too can experience joy not only in growing closer to God in our lives, but helping others grow closer to Him. What brings God joy, is also what should bring us joy as well. If we're going to spend eternity with God, I suppose we should learn to love what He loves which is that internal sense of joy seeing others come to Him. The point here as it ties to these verses is the religious leaders of Jesus day made the mistake of thinking they were "above" reaching out to the lost. Jesus wants to teach the opposite in this chapter. Speaking of which:

4. Verse 3: Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'
- a) Here is the first of the three parables told in these five verses. To explain these verses, it is probably best if I explain a little about taking care of sheep. The first thing to realize about raising sheep is that they are very dumb animals. If a sheep falls over on its side, it can't get back up on its own. Sheep have no self-defensive measures. One reason that people are compared to sheep in the bible is due to the fact that sheep are not smart creatures.
 - b) Another way sheep are a problem is they easily get lost or stray away from the pack. That is why if a sheep gets lost, one has to find it. With a herd of 100 sheep, it was common for there to be more than one shepherd. If this was a true case of shepherding sheep, there'd be someone watching the 99 sheep while someone goes after the missing one. However, that isn't the point here. The point here is that the one in charge of the sheep doesn't want any to be lost so he leaves the 99 out in the field to go after the one that strayed away.
 - c) What is also important to consider here is that professional shepherding was considered to be "beneath" the religious leaders. The Pharisees viewed "nomad" shepherds as a job that was beneath them. I mention that as in this crowd of religious and nonreligious Jews I suspect some in the crowd figured out that the lost sheep refers to those who were born of Jewish heritage but were non-religious.
 - d) I also admit that I know of Christians who use the term "the lost sheep" or the "100th" to describe themselves as a nickname. My point is this story of the lost sheep is commonly used among Christians to describe themselves. As an alternative to wearing a cross on one's neck, I've seen necklaces of a man carrying a sheep on his neck, which symbolizes what we're reading about here in these verses. The thought occurred to me that I never wear a cross around my neck, but I'd seriously consider wearing a necklace of a man who was carrying a sheep around his neck as it shows God carrying for the lost sinner.
 - e) What is implied in these verses but not stated, is that a sheep is not smart enough on its own to be lead back to the flock, so it had to be carried back. A full-grown sheep weighs up to 75 pounds, so this is a good size load to carry on one's back. My point is the man in this story required all of his strength and effort in order to bring this sheep back home.
 - f) The final part of the verse is that when the man brought home the lost sheep, he wants to express his joy and invites his friends and neighbors to celebrate with him. We might say if a person is just doing their job, that's not a big deal and not a reason to celebrate. If we think of the lost sheep as a lost member of our family being lost and then found, then we would celebrate.
 - i) The way we might relate to this story is if a child of ours wanders off on their own and they get stuck somewhere. If and when we rescue them, then we would have a celebration for the fact they are home again. The way God views that lost sheep or the way we may view a rescued child is the way God views anyone who turns to Him with their lives as we'll see in the next two stories.
5. Verse 7: I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.
- a) Here is the "punch line" of the opening story about saving the lost sheep. Notice Jesus is drawing His audience into a simple story about describing a man guarding his sheep and then throwing a celebration when he finds one of the lost sheep. The punch line is here in Verse 7 to say that heaven rejoices over one person who turns from their sin more than 99 people who don't want to repent. Remember that Jesus' audience was full of Pharisees. Their view is that one shouldn't waste their time teaching God's laws to "sinners". They thought they were above helping those who don't care about God.

- b) Consider who was in the crowd listening to Jesus: The "tax collectors and sinners" were interested in what Jesus had to say. They were attracted to Him and the religious leaders of that day couldn't stand Jesus for all intents and purposes. Jesus never encouraged the people to sin, but to give people hope. My point is it's easy to think, "I'm beyond help. I sin too much and I can't stop." Here comes Jesus teaching that one does not have to live like the devoutly religious leaders in order to be saved, but trust in God's power to make a difference in our lives and let Him work through us to make a difference. As I heard it explained to me another way, "being moral without God's grace is a waste of time". When we try to live a good life without God's power, we're doing it for the sake of our ego to try to prove to ourselves how good we are. Jesus is coming along teaching that we can have joy, if we rely upon His power in order to make a difference for Him in this world.
- c) That speech leads me back to Verse 7. Whenever I hear about a person who has made the decision to trust Jesus to be in charge of their lives as well as believing He was raised from the dead, I like to express a moment of joy. The way I figure is if I'm going to be with God for eternity, I need to get used to the idea of liking what He likes and having joy over the things that brings God joy. We have to remember that being a Christian means we are to act like slaves to Jesus. That simply means it should be our desire to do His will. It's not a negative thing. In fact, it should be joyful. What God wants to get across in Verse 7 is if He gets joy out of people getting saved, we should share in that joy.
 - i) Think about people who spend their lives working as "professional missionaries" who try to lead people to get saved. Do you think they should be miserable and just do their job, or should they have joy in seeing people get it? What I'm trying to get across is that joy is contagious. If we express joy in telling others about God and what His Son Jesus did for us, that joy should and will spread. Nobody wants to be with a person who lacks joy. We have an obligation to act joyful whether we feel like it or not. If Jesus calls us to be His witnesses for Him, then we need to live with the attitude of joy in order to express it to others.
 - ii) OK, what if I'm having a tough day, how do I express joy? It is to realize that no matter what happens, we will have joy for all of eternity. Whatever tragedies do happen in this lifetime, is at the most for this lifetime. I'm also a big believer when I'm not acting joyful to apologize to people I've been mean too, that I didn't act in a way that was, joyful no matter what.
 - iii) To state this the opposite way, nobody wants to be around a miserable person. It will eventually drive people away from us if we never have any joy in our lives.
 - iv) All of that does ties to Verse 7. If God gets joy from seeing people get saved, then I too, should share in that joy as I should want what God wants. It's not a matter of saying, "God's full of joy, therefore I need to be full of joy because I have to." It's a matter of thinking, I'm going to be with God forever, and if He's full of joy, then I want to feel that joy and share that joy with others around me.
- d) To finish up Verse 7, keep in mind that we have an obligation to express that joy to others. If you don't feel it at the moment, remember the "ALANON" motto of "Fake it until you make it". In other words if we don't feel joyful, we still owe it to those around us to show joy even though we may not feel joyful at that moment. If nothing else, we should have the motivation to act joyful, as it's our Christian duty to do so. If you are going through a tough time and can't think of a reason to be joyful, then consider the fact one is saved for all of eternity. That is larger than whatever problem we're dealing with at the moment. If we don't know how God's going to get us out of our problem, remember that God taught us that He'll never leave us or forsake us. (Hebrews 13:5 or Deuteronomy 31:6.) My point is trusting in that Promise alone should bring us the type of joy and in effect we have no excuse to be miserable to those around us, no matter what the situation.
- e) OK, now that I've joyfully beaten Verse 7 to death, time for the next parable.

6. Verse 8: "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."
- a) The second parable of this chapter is only three verses. Before I begin, I've read a lot of speculation as to why this woman had these coins and why it was so significant that she found them. My answer is "it's a made up story". Therefore as we study this story, don't "miss the forest from the trees" and simply see the story as Jesus trying to make a point of how God rejoices over sinners who repent which is Verse 10.
 - b) In this short parable, there's a woman who had 10 silver coins and loses one of them. The woman then carefully searches the house until she finds the lost coin. I suspect most of us can relate to the idea of losing something of value to us and enlisting all the help we can, in order to find what we're missing. God knows how many times I've searched my home for lost keys or say my wallet. I've learned the importance of praying over things that get lost as I want to get God involved in the process of finding what is lost.
 - c) Coming back to the parable, in this story, a woman loses 10 silver coins. To state what is obvious in this parable, finding the lost coin was so important to her, that she actually has a little party to celebrate. We might read this and think that this woman doesn't have much of a life if she's willing to celebrate over something that small. Now stop and think of those moments when we've spent say, hours looking for something that's lost and for a brief moment feel some happiness or joy when that lost item was found. Jesus' point here in this little story is just as that woman had joy for a moment, so is there joy in heaven at the moments when one sinner repents and turns to God.
 - d) Let me pause for a moment to come back to the idea that I believe God knows all things. If He knows all things, why would it bring Him joy at the moments of repentance? It is because God has love as a built in character to His nature. Having love, means He desires to have someone or something to share that love with. God has chosen people to be with Him forever so that He can express that love upon them and us. All we have to do is by our free will, chose to accept that love. Yes I believe God knows all things. However, it does bring Him joy to see people repent and turn from their sins. That's why heaven is in effect one big party as joy is always being expressed for those willing to trust in Him for all of eternity. We experience that joy not based on being a good person, but just based on trusting in His payment for our sins as opposed to trying to prove our worth to Him.
 - e) Speaking of those trying to prove their worth to God, let me come back to the Pharisee's for a moment. You might recall that I said that this group thought that they were above being professional shepherders which was the example given in the first story. Here in the second story, a woman was listed who apparently had as her most valuable thing she owned, ten silver coins. My point is Jesus is trying to get across that what some may think is "beneath them" is who God cares about to be with them forever. Before we turn our collective noses at these Pharisee's, pause and consider who we may see as those who are beneath us. Those are the one's Jesus loves as well as us. I'm just saying the next time we feel anger at a person or group, remind ourselves, how does God see them? The idea of the "golden rule" is to treat people as you want to be treated, not based on how anyone actually does treat us. That's why Jesus teaches us to pray for our enemies (Matthew 5:44) so that we learn to see people as God sees them and not as someone who actually hurt us.
 - f) All of that leads me back to the topic of joy. In order to have that joy, first there needs to be repentance. The good news is that is one of the main topics of the third and final story in this chapter, the "prodigal son". Before I begin, I suspect most of us don't know what that word actually means. It's not in the story itself. It's an Old English word, describing someone who wastes all of his or her money on frivolous things. OK, onto the story itself:

7. Verse 11: Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.
- a) In this third made up story, we have a man who we'll find out through the story, had a large estate. He also had two sons. The younger son said to the father effectively, "I don't want to wait until you die. Give me my share of your estate now". I have to admit, if that was my son, the first thing I might say is "I'm still alive and I need that estate to live on". I would be tempted to tell my son to grow up and don't demand what isn't yours yet at this point in his life.
 - b) I find the amazing part about Verse 11 is the idea that the father agreed to divide up the family estate at this point and give a portion to his son. One has to realize in that culture if a son asked to do this, that son is effectively asking to be disowned by his father. What is being implied is the son wants nothing to do with his father and wants to be disowned as part of the family. Imagine telling one's parents, I don't want to be associated with you anymore. Now since you (my parents) are legally obligated (in Jewish laws) to give to me a share of the family estate, do it now as I can't wait until you die. Again, if that was my son, I'd tell him to grow up or I can't do it now as that's the worst thing I can do for you at this point in your life. That's why I am so amazed that the father agreed to do this. It's as if the father was thinking, "I know you're going to blow it all, but to teach you what's the proper thing to do, I'll let you do what you want."
 - i) I state that as often God gives us what we want, even though it's not His will. It's a little like God thinking, "I know this is a bad idea, but hopefully by us doing the wrong thing, that will eventually drive us back to God."
 - ii) By the way as far as Jewish law is concerned, the son is legally dead in that if he's chosen to walk away from his family, the father can perform a ceremony where his son is legally considered dead. There are ancient rituals for the devoutly Jewish if say a son becomes a Christian, that son is no longer recognized as a son. If one has seen the movie or the play "Fiddler on the Roof", the youngest daughter becomes a Christian, her father disowns her and that's the general idea here of the son in this made up parable legally no longer being a son.
8. Verse 13: "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. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.
- a) At this point in the story, the son "cashed the check" for his share of the estate. It's logical to assume he sold his share at a discount so he could spend it as soon as he could. Notice the son moved as far away as he could from his father. The text says in Verse 13 that the son left for a distant country. I remember back when I went to college I met people who came from literally the furthest ends of our country or other parts of the world, literally to get as far away from their parents as possible. My point is it is common to think, "I'm out of here, now let me get away from my past life as far as humanly possible."
 - b) Since that son had the "cashed check" from the estate, he began to spend it on wild living as stated in the end of Verse 13. As I stated, the word "prodigal" is an Old English word that means "one who wastes away their money". My point is it is used to described "wild living". To quote a famous proverb, "A fool and his money are soon parted". That's what we have here. If the quick spending of his money didn't kill the son financially, then we read of a severe famine in Verse 14. To understand a "severe famine", one has to get the idea of literally nothing to eat. If you've read in the Old Testament where it talks about "sieges", that's where a foreign army surrounds a city with the intent of starving it out. That's the idea behind a severe famine. Where one is so desperate for food, one's willing to just about anything to eat something.

- c) By Verse 15 in the "starting to sink to rock bottom" part of this story, the man goes off to feed pigs in order to get food. What I suspect, but can't prove is the man started to be a beggar and finally someone said, "Go feed my pigs, but stop asking me for money". One also has to understand that in a Jewish culture, pigs are a forbidden food. Imagine those religious leaders listening to Jesus parable thinking, "This son disowns his father, wastes away his father's wealth and now is sitting there feeding pigs. That son got exactly what he deserved for treating his father the way he did."
 - d) I should also comment a little about feeding pigs here. If one ever has been around large pigs, they eat anything and everything. There is an old "mafia" joke that if one needs to dispose of a dead body, get some pigs as they eat every last part of that dead body. The point I'm making here is that if the son feeding the pigs wanted to eat some of the food allocated for those pigs, it's a tough battle as pigs will fight for all of their food and let's just say it's tough to defeat them trying to get their food. The point is this formerly rich son, literally had nothing to eat as he couldn't even get any of the food he was feeding to the pigs at the only "job" he could find.
 - e) If one has ever heard the expression "rock bottom", this is it. That's a description of one's life getting so bad, one can't get any worse than it is right now. People who attend "AA" meetings commonly use the expression rock bottom to describe what got them to those meetings in the first place. For this son to lose everything he had, and feeding pigs and not getting any of that food is a good Jewish description of rock bottom.
 - f) The good news is God often does His best work when people hit that point as they have no one to depend upon but God Himself for help. I've seen God do some pretty amazing things with people at that point in their lives. If one is familiar with the Salvation Army, it is a Christian organization designed to help people who are at rock bottom at their lives.
 - g) Speaking of people realizing they are at rock bottom, that leads us back to this story.
9. Verse 17: "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! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.
- a) As this son was sitting among the pigs, desperate for food, it dawned on him that back when he was living with his father, the hired servants who worked for his father were paid enough that they had food to spare. Therefore, it dawned on him that it would be worth the effort to apologize to his father and ask to be a hired servant as then he'd be better off than he was right now.
 - b) Earlier in this lesson, I discussed the idea of "repentance". That's the idea of realizing we have sinned and we desire to turn from that sin. That in effect is what we are reading of here as the son, is practicing his speech to his father saying "I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be your son. Make me be one of your hired servants." (Quoting Verses 18 and 19 here). That's repentance. Notice the son realized he had sinned against God first, not for begin with pigs, but for demanding his share of his father's estate while his father was still alive and using it.
 - c) Personally, I could just see the Pharisee's in this crowd nodding their heads in agreement at this part of the story. They understood what repentance is. The Jewish way to repent is for the son to work off what He took as only then he deserves repentance. Repentance in a Jewish culture is to make-up as best one can to the person we have hurt. It's about when we make the effort to restore the damage we have done by the sin in the first place. What we have to realize is as far as God is concerned, repentance is about coming to Him empty handed, in that we can't repay Him for the damage we've done. The underlying point is that God wants a relationship with us so much, He's willing to forgive anything except for a lifelong denial that He Himself (that is Jesus on the cross) paying for all of those sins. In other words, the cross is paying for the penalty for our sins, every time we sin.

- d) It is important to understand the difference between repentance versus just feeling sorry for what we did. There are a handful of stories in the bible where people actually stated that they have sinned against God, but then never changed their behavior. Saul, the first king of Israel is an example. Even Judas, after He betrayed Jesus, stated that He betrayed innocent blood, but then, say didn't rejoin the other disciples to apologize. The concept of repentance is two fold: First is to apologize to God, and the second is to about making the effort to turn from that sin. Yes all of us have issues we struggle with. The question is do we make the effort to do something about it and turn from it.
 - i) I state that here, because the son in this story not only realizes he was wrong as he confesses to God his sin, but is then willing to face the humiliation of going home to face not only his father, but his brother and the townsfolk where he lived, who if they don't know already, will soon be aware of what he did. My point is the son is sorry enough for his sins that he's willing to do something about it.
 - ii) That in effect is what "rock bottom" is all about. It's getting to a mental point that we realize we have messed up and without God's power, can't change. That's why the first thing we do is confess our sin to God, and then perform the repentance by make the effort to turn from that sin.
 - iii) Speaking of that son, notice he's not only willing to confess his sin, but also willing to go work as a slave to his father to repay back the sin. The issue of repentance is not only a willingness to do something about it, but to actually make the effort to go change our lifestyle. That's why Verse 20 is there, to tell us the son left where he was living to travel back to Israel to find his father.
 - iv) I stated earlier that the Pharisee's were probably nodding their head in agreement at this point in the story. They grasped the idea of repentance. They would have thought, "Good, let him go work for dad for a good while until he's paid off all he took from his father and only then can the father respect him."
 - e) With all of that said, remember that this story is not about repentance, but about joy. Yes it does teach what repentance is as the bible does teach that. However, the main point of this story and this chapter is to understand how God experiences joy that He wants us to have in our lives as well. Which leads us to the last half of Verse 20.
10. Verse 20, Part 2: "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.
- a) To understand this critical verse, understand that in Middle East culture, for a son to do this act, a father would consider his son to be dead. Again, it's a little like Fiddler on the Roof where the Father says to his youngest daughter when she converted to Christianity that she is no longer his daughter. In that play/movie, the father put his faith in God as a priority over his love for his daughter. Remember in the last chapter, Jesus stated that we have to love God more than our love for any family member. Someone from a religious Jewish background would get that idea. The question each of us must answer is, if Jesus is God, are we are willing to make that type of commitment of honoring Jesus more than honoring one's one family. What we learn is that by loving Jesus, then, we have a greater power to love others. However, that point is besides the story at hand here.
 - b) My point is the father in this story, even though he considered his son dead, still had love for his son and desired him to return home. My point is I believe the Pharisee's listening to this story would be thinking, "I would never run to go kiss my son. Let him continue to go stink of pig's for a while and make him think about the consequences of what he did.
 - i) Yet, instead of making the son feel the embarrassment for what he did, the father ran to go greet him and kiss him. Speaking of Middle East culture issues, men in that culture wore long robes and not pants. It was considered undignified in that culture to pull up one's skirt to start running, unless say one was a soldier. The reason I'm stating this is to understand how shocking this was to the audience.

- c) That leads to the key point of this story, which is about how much love God has for us. In this moment, the father ran out of town to greet the son. Considering it was daytime, as the father spotted the son a long ways away, the father spared his son the embarrassment of having to face other members of the town, so he ran to greet him. The key point of the story is the father had so much joy to see the son come home, he ran to greet him, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The picture here is about how much joy God has as we turn from our lifestyle to trust Him with our lives. As I said, heaven is a place of joy, so if we want to feel joy, we need to be joyful about what God is joyful about, and that is when people are willing to turn from their sins to trust God to guide their lives.
 - i) Suppose we think, "we sort of know all of this". We trust God with our lives and we desire to turn from sin. The issue for us is our own joy. Do we see people as needing Jesus or do we focus on their faults. My point is I want to have joy in my life. I'd rather be full of joy than say, full of anger of something someone has done to me. I understand well there are moments of pain and sorrow in our lives. I'm just saying we can have internal joy even at the worst of times, knowing that God has joy that we trust in Him for our lives and our trusting Him through whatever we are dealing with at the present moment. In summary, if God is full of joy, and we're going to be with Him forever, we might as well have that same type of joy in our own lives as we're going to be with Him forever.
 - ii) To express this thought another way, the wrong attitude is to think, "When I get to heaven then I'll have joy as then my problems will be gone". The right attitude is about realizing God wants us to have joy now. It brings God joy when people like we read in this story trust Him to guide their lives. It should also bring us joy not only when life is going well, but especially when life isn't going well. The idea is that God is still there, guiding us, wanting us to be full of joy because He's aware of all the issue's were facing and wants to be there to guide us through our lives.
 - d) With all of that stated, stop and think about the father hugging the son here. The father ran out of town, to avoid the son having to face the embarrassment of facing the town for what he did. The father is willing to treat the son as a son, despite what He did. That is also how God sees us: Not as a bunch of sinners, but as individuals willing to turn from our sins and trust Him to guide us no matter how bad we have messed up our lives.
 - i) In the meantime, I'm guessing the son in his long trip home, rehearsed over and over again his speech to his father, and now he has to get it out of his system:
11. Verse 21: "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'"
- a) Repentance is when we're willing not only to feel sorry for what we have done, but also willing to face the consequences for our actions. As I like to say, I'm convinced God can instantly forgive us of our sins, but we still may have to face the consequences of damage we have done due to our actions. There are many born-again believers in prisons, who also realize they have to pay the price for their crimes. My point is the son in this made up story is willing to face the consequences for what he did as he is suffering from guilt over his actions. Verse 22 shows God's reaction to that guilt.
12. Verse 22: "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. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate."
- a) To paraphrase the father, "Who cares what you did? You're my son and I've always loved you as my own. You were dead to me when you left me and now you're back home. It's time to throw a party because your back home again." The point is the father treated his son like a son. The act of putting a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet are both cultural acts of showing one is a son again. Let me explain that further:

- i) A "family ring" for a non-slave in that culture was used for signatures. One would place that ring in wax to put a seal on a document. It was a way to sign things.
 - ii) Also in that culture, slaves and servants went bare foot and people of stature wore sandals. I admit that I've always been fascinated by the fact if one reads in Exodus about what the priests wore in God's Temple, the clothes are described in detail all the way down to the underwear, but there is never any mention of any sandals or shoes. That's because the worship of God was to show our willingness in effect to be a slave to His desire for our lives. Going barefoot was a small way of showing one's willingness to be a slave to someone else.
 - b) That leads me back to our story. The point is the Father didn't say to his son, you should stay here stinking of pigs for a while. Instead the father was willing to accept the son as he was, put sandals on his feet and a ring on his finger to show the Father's acceptance of his son as a son again. The point is to show us how much joy God has for us anytime we are willing to turn from our sins to trust in His guidance.
 - c) Speaking of the story, there are a few more details to discuss in this last verse. One has to remember that eating meat in that culture was a rare event. Killing the "fatted calf" was enough feed a few hundred people. Consider how many people an entire cow can feed and one gets the idea of how big this party was. The idea is to show us that God has so much joy over our repentance, that it is "celebrating time" and not a time for us to suffer for what we have done. The point is we may have to pay to society for our crimes, or we may still have our bodies suffer for the damage we've done to it, but God instantly does forgive us when and if we actually turn from our sin issues. We may even have to live with damage others have done to hurt us. The point is God is full of joy when we are willing to turn that situation over to Him. God wants us to have that joy as well.
 - d) The great lesson of this made up story, isn't that the son came home. It's that we can have joy in our lives when we let God be in charge not only of ways we have messed up, but also be in charge of ways others have hurt us. Turning our situations over to God to deal with not only relieves us of the burden, but also allows us to experience His joy as it's no longer our problem to worry about. Yes of course we still have to deal with our lives. We now have God's power to work through us to give us the boldness and the courage to face whatever it is we have to face to go through those situations.
 - e) With all of that happiness stated, we still have more to the story. The last part of the story deals with the reaction of the older brother to his younger brother coming home. We get this story here in effect to show what's wrong with thinking that "being moral" isn't good enough for God. Let me explain with these verses:
13. Verse 25: "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.²⁷ 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'
- a) The older brother at this point in the story was in effect, doing his daily chores. When he came back in the house, he heard the noise of the party. The servant then explained to the older son what had happened. To paraphrase, "Boy, are you missing a great party. You should have gotten home earlier and enjoyed a great steak dinner. Your brother has come home and we're all having a big party for the fact he's home safe and sound".
 - b) The point of this final section of the story, is that the older brother should have joined in the celebration. Instead, we're about to realize his anger that the father accepted the son as is. This part of the story is here to teach us that God will instantly forgive us of our sins and we don't have to try to earn God's love back. Remember that the Jewish concept of repentance is to have to work off our debts to God. The idea of instant forgiveness when we're willing to turn from that sin was a tough concept for that culture to accept. That is why Jesus added this part of the story to help us understand God's joy over that change.

14. Verse 28: "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"
- a) The first thing to catch here is the older son's lack of gratitude for what he has. Remember that the older son still has in tact his share of the inheritance. It's almost as if the older son is thinking, "I know my brother ran off and squandered his share of the estate, but I'm just waiting for dad to die off before I can do what I want with what is coming to me."
 - b) I admit I'm fascinated by the fact the older brother was well aware of how his brother had wasted his share of his inheritance. The older son found out that his brother had used the money he got for prostitutes. Instead of being grateful that his brother had turned from that lifestyle, the older brother wanted to "revel" his hatred for what he had done. That is how we can live when we refuse to forgive someone. We revel in our anger. That's how we let others continue to hurt us long after the damage is done. The idea is we won't let go of the anger as in effect that's all we have left of that experience.
 - c) My point is the older son had no joy that his brother is back. He's just angry that he still has to work the farm, while his brother is back home. Remember that the older brother is not losing his inheritance. The issue's about experiencing joy over what God has joy over. The point is when we see someone get saved, we shouldn't be thinking, "Well, that's good for them, however I have my own life to deal with. Where is my party as I've worked my whole life trying to make a difference for God? The remainder of the family estate still in effect belongs to the older son, so he never lost his reward. The point is he won't share in the joy of his brother's salvation.
 - d) All of that leads to the final two verses of this chapter:
15. Verse 31: " 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "
- a) These final two verses explain the situation from the father's perspective. Consider that we have now heard this story from the perspective of both sons. The only thing left to discuss is the situation from the father's perspective. The point the father's making is that the older son never lost his share of the inheritance. That's a reminder to those of us who have lived a long time serving God that we haven't gotten our "fattened calf" yet as we're still living as God calls us to live.
 - b) I'm convinced that some people are going to appreciate heaven far more than others. We will find some people with no joy in their hearts over the salvation of people as they spent their lives focusing on their own problems. The older brother had a bad case of the "woe is me" syndrome. He can't have joy in his life at that moment, as he's so busy worrying about his own situation he can't experience the joy of seeing others have joy in their lives.
 - c) What this comes down to is the issue of would we rather be miserable and focus on our own issues, or experience the joy that God wants to have in our lives? At any moment in our lives we can choose to be miserable or choose to be full of joy. Often we can't control the things that happen to us, but we can always be in control of our attitude of how we mentally handle those situations. I'm not saying we have to pretend like our problems don't exist. I'm saying this life is the only one we get. We can choose to be miserable as we go through it, or choose to see life as God sees it: as an opportunity to experience joy as we watch people "get it" and turn to Him after realizing our mistakes.
 - d) That's why the father in this story is encouraging his older son to be joyful and not focus on his own life at the moment. One of the greatest things to learn in life is when one is going through a tough time, go make a difference for someone else as it will bring us joy as well as helping someone else in need at the present moment.

- e) With that said, I'm in a more joyful mood not because I finished the lesson, but because I realize that our joy in life is not based on my circumstances but only based on God's joy can and does work through us. We can experience God's joy not out of necessity, but because that's the way God wants us to live. The question comes down to whether or not we'd rather go through life joyful or full of misery. The younger son realized apart from being with his father, he can't have joy in his life. The older son didn't realize that unless he got his mind off his own problems, he could never have joy in his life. Does life have problems? Of course it does and we have to face them. However, we can have joy during those situations if we are willing to rely upon God to provide us with that joy so we can appreciate this life as we go through it.
 - f) With that said, let us pray for God's joy to be a greater part of our lives.
16. Heavenly Father, Help us to remember that You are full of joy and want to share that joy with us in our lives. Help us to remember that You are well aware of whatever it is we have to deal with at the present moment and want to guide us through our issues. At the same time, You want us to have joy in our lives. Help us to remember that You are the source of our joy and desire that we feel that joy no matter what we are dealing with at the present time. Help us to be filled with Your joy as we use our time to make a difference for You in the world around us. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.