



THE PASTOR'S PEN

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Lent 2015

What is the purpose of Lent? It is a time that we purposely and thoughtfully use to prepare ourselves to welcome the risen Christ with lives renewed by the breath of His spirit. It is a time that we assume a discipline of self-examination, confession, and penitence by meditating upon the scriptures and to talking with God in prayer. It is a time that we use for focusing our lives and our actions into being more faithful disciples of Christ. While there are many ways for each one of us to do this, the most traditional way is that of giving up something from Ash Wednesday until Easter. Every year I hear folks talking about giving up sweets or TV or some other thing they enjoy and then they complain about how they feel miserably tempted for the whole Lenten season. I also hear from others how guilty they feel when they “slip up” or “forget” that they were not supposed to be enjoying what they had given up and catch themselves after the fact. So why do we do it? Do we think that God likes to see us being miserable? Do we think that by suffering, we are more worthy of God’s love and grace? [Just for the record, the answer to these last two questions is no.]

It is importation to our faith and practice of being a Christian that we realize and understand that the idea behind our observance of Lent is so that we can focus our thoughts on Jesus ministry and service, as well as learn from His example. One way that we do this is through worship and another is through imitation. The idea behind giving up something for Lent is so that we can share in the forty days of privation that Jesus experienced in the wilderness in preparation for His ministry. But what was He doing it for? The idea of giving up something for Lent was not meant to be a test of your willpower or to force you to endure suffering for the sake of suffering. The original purpose was that when you gave up something for Lent, you were supposed to replace it with more prayer, self-examination and study in your personal life. Which, by the way, was what Jesus was doing out in the wilderness as He fasted.

For the Church today this means that if you decided to fast every day at lunchtime, the idea is not to just keep on working through lunch thinking how hungry you are. Instead, you are supposed to take your regular lunch time and fill it with prayer and personal devotions.

Likewise, if you decided to give up an hour of TV every night, you are not supposed to sit there in the dark, in silence, missing your favorite show. No, you gave that time up so that you could use it for bible reading, or even performing acts of Christian charity. The reason behind this Lenten tradition is to help you by giving you a little extra time to grow in your spiritual life and knowledge about God and what God expects from you as a part of the church today.

As the years have gone by, we as Christians have often forgotten the intent but kept the outward practice of such traditions. Too often we have done things by rote rather than by understanding and giving up something for Lent is just one example. When it comes to matters of faith and practice it is our responsibility to know what we are doing, why we are doing it and when we should do it.

Speaking of the “when”, the seven weeks of the Lenten season lasts for more than forty days. So why do we always talk about observing just forty days of Lent? It is because Sundays do not count. That’s right, Sundays do not count! Since you are already setting aside a portion of your normal daily schedule each Sunday for worship, prayer and bible study (or at least you are supposed to be doing that every week), it is not counted as a part of the time you set aside for additional daily prayer and devotions during the Lenten season. So if you decide to give up something for Lent this year to make more time for prayer and study, make sure you also attend worship on each Sunday as a part of your commitment.

One last thing I want to leave with you as we observe the season of Lent, Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 6:17-18:

¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

So as you observe Lent this year, remember that this is a **personal** time of self-examination and drawing closer to God. Whatever you have to say or do, do it to improve your relationship with your Lord. When you do it this way, then everything else in your life will also fall into its proper place.

Now that you know a little more about what is behind our Lenten traditions, go ahead and enjoy your sweets and your TV this Lent. However, I would also like to challenge you to set aside a portion of each day for extra prayer and bible study between each Monday and Saturday of the Lenten season this year. If you find that you need to give up a coffee break or a thirty minute of sports or TV to make time for it, that’s fine, just as long as you understand what you are doing and why you are doing it.

Observing the season with you,

James

