

LENT

The Origin and Purpose of Lent

EASTER, the Day of the Resurrection, is the most important celebration of the Church. From the beginning, the Church observed a period of fasting before Easter to prepare for the feast. This season of fasting was eventually lengthened to forty days to correspond to the forty day fasts in the Bible: The fast of Jesus in the wilderness before he was tempted by the devil (Matt. 4:1), the fast of Moses on Mt. Sinai while he was receiving the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:28), and the fast of Elijah when he fled from Jezebel (1 Kings 19:8).

The Sundays of Lent are not counted as days of fasting; it is forty days from Ash Wednesday to Easter if we do not count the Sundays. The church observes Sunday perpetually as the Day of Resurrection. The lenten Sundays are properly observed with a relaxation of the fast.

The Danger of Lent

People talk about what they will “give up” for Lent. This can become a competitive and prideful thing; a mere religious activity without aim or goal for others. The purpose of Lent is to bring us closer to God. The discipline of fasting helps us to detach ourselves from things so that we can increase our prayer and our experience of God’s presence in our lives. Apart from this goal of spiritual growth, the things we “give up” for Lent will profit us nothing. The Bible warns us about the unprofitable nature of fasting when it is practiced wrongly (see Isaiah 58:3-5 and Matthew 6:16). Thus, before considering what you will fast from, first examine your life to identify your current areas of temptation and struggle, and link your fast to prayers for growth in these areas.

Guidelines for Lent

Our observance of Lent should also reflect our spiritual maturity. Some people have been observing Lent for decades, while other may be observing their first Lent. Adopt a Lenten Rule that is appropriate for your current spiritual state.

The general rule for Lent is to “eat less and exercise more.” We decrease our intake of food, pleasure, and entertainment and increase our practice of spiritual disciplines. The tradition of the church provides us with guidelines for our Lenten practice. Each day consists of one full meal and two smaller portions of food. Wednesdays and Fridays in Lent are days of abstinence from flesh meat. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of complete fasting. No food is eaten until sundown. Medical issues and age are reasons to moderate the fast of food. If you struggle with an eating disorder, seek professional guidance in observing the fast of food.

We may abstain from specific foods, pleasures and entertainments for the forty days. Consumption of alcohol and desserts should be eliminated or reduced. It is essential that the lenten fast include computer, electronics, phone, and media, which occupy too much space in almost everyone’s life. The goal is to create an atmosphere of silence and stillness that is conducive to prayer.

Why Fast?

As the hunger and desire created by the fast is directed towards God in prayer, we learn the spiritual truth of John 6:35, "He who comes to me shall never hunger and he who believes in me shall never thirst." We also fast to gain control of our appetites. As we abstain, we develop self-control. Pleasure is good when it is sought within the will of God; but we are only free to enjoy things from which we are also free to abstain. Fasting develops the ability to say "no" and, thus, the ability to say "yes" in the right way. Self-control is one fruit of fasting. As Jesus said, "Your Father who sees [your fasting] in secret will reward you openly" (Matthew 6:18).

Prayer

As we turn away from things, we open up room in our lives for a greater experience of God's presence and power. We live the Christian life by God's grace. Grace comes into our lives through prayer. If we want to draw closer to God, we must necessarily increase our practice of prayer. Those who already practice the discipline of Morning and Evening Prayer (the "daily offices") might add time for silence, meditation, or conversational prayer. Those who do not now practice the discipline of the daily offices might pray one or both for the forty days of the season. Some form of noon day prayer can also be helpful.

Bible Reading

Our times of prayer should include Bible reading. God reveals his will to us through Holy Scripture. Too often, attitudes and opinions are formed by the internet article, the radio commentator, or the T.V. show rather than by the word of God. If we want God to speak to us, we must read what he has said. Bible reading is essential to the life of prayer and the Lenten Rule.

The Book of Common Prayer contains a lectionary with readings for each day of the year. It begins on page x and ends on page xlv. The lessons for Lent begin with Ash Wednesday on page xvi and xvii. These lessons are meant to be read in the context of Morning and Evening Prayer. Make daily Bible reading a part of your Lenten rule and, indeed, a part of your regular rule of life.

Confession

As we fast we ought to consider what is going on in our relationship with Christ and what sort of changes ought to be made. A good confession does not focus on every little bad habit. Surface behaviors often mask deeper problems within. The best confession is the fruit of prayer. We should ask God to reveal to what is wrong in our lives. Lent is a good time to ask and listen for an extended season. The purpose of confession is forgiveness and change. As St. John writes, "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Good Works

The result of confession and forgiveness is new behavior—"fruits worthy of repentance" (Luke 3:8) or "the fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22). Good works are things we do for the benefit of others because we are motivated by the love of Christ. Lent is a time to reconcile with others with whom we may have conflicts. Lent is a time for renewed response to the needs we see around us. Lent is a time to consider how God is calling us to use our gifts in ministry. Our good works are the evidence that God is working in us. The Holy Spirit makes us less self-centered and more responsive to the needs of others.

Lent is a season of opportunity given to us by the church. Lent is an invitation to turn from self towards God and so experience in greater measure the joy of Easter.