

# Your Best Lent Ever – Part 3

## How Do I Make a Good Lent?

At the beginning of Lent, this is the question on everyone's mind. By following the prescriptions below, it may help you to make Lent more significant. It will prepare you, not only for Easter, but for the rest of your life as well as eternity.

While some readers of this story may not be Catholics, the truths about Lent are not just for Catholics but for Christians of all denominations. By adopting these strategies, the practices of Lent are aimed at helping everyone to follow Christ more closely.

When it comes to Lent, most think: "What will I give up this year?" That sentiment harkens back to the origins of Lent as a time of fasting before Easter. Your instinct is good, since one aspect of Lent is growing in self-control and discipline. We all know about the rules regarding abstaining from meat on Fridays. Others cut down on TV watching or Internet use. These are all great practices that help us exercise self-discipline and self-control as well as create more time for spiritual reading and prayer. Moderation is the key. You don't need to abstain from everything totally. Strive for a healthy balance.

## What About People?

Two days after Ash Wednesday, we always hear from the prophet Isaiah. In chapter 58, he criticizes the people for fasting while they oppress others and seek their own pleasures! In other words, they do the "religious thing" and then live a double life. It is so easy to perform the religious rituals and then, once they are over, gossip about people at the following meal. By all means, fast from food, but just as importantly, fast from gossip, negativity, and participating in self-deprecating thoughts.

Isaiah continues about fasting as he writes: "Is not this the fast that I want: to loose the bonds of wickedness and to undo the thongs of the yoke, to share your bread with the hungry, house the homeless, clothed the naked, and take care of your own family?" (Isaiah 58:6–7). What is Isaiah driving at here? Why is this read very early in Lent?

Lent (and life in general) is about people and how we treat them. If you want to make a good Lent, certainly practice self-discipline. But don't forget what really matters – how we treat people!

Jesus preached about this dichotomy between ritualistic religion and neglecting people in several places. In the story of the good Samaritan, the Jewish priest and religious Levite cross over to the other side of the road when they see the wounded man. They don't have time for him and don't want to get involved. After all, they are going up to Jerusalem to offer worship and sacrifice!

In another place Jesus said, "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there and go; first be reconciled to them, and then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23–24).

You can pray, fast, and practice self-denial until you lose a lot of weight and your knees hurt from kneeling, but if you have not learned to treat people with respect and kindness and to reach out to others, you are missing the point. The reason Jesus turned the tables in the temple is because he was adamant about the purification of religion. James put it this way: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction." (James 1:27).

Jesus had a great aversion toward religious duplicity. He mitigated against stressing the less important while leaving out what really matters. To the ostentatiously religious Pharisees he inveighed: "Woe to you Pharisees! You tithe the mint and dill and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!" (Matthew 23:23–24).

The greatest teaching Jesus gave regarding what really matters and what is important in Lent (and in life) occurs during the first week of Lent. It is the gospel account about the Last Judgment (Matthew 25:31–46). At the end of time, Jesus will come as judge, and the criteria of his judgment will be how we treated "the least" of our brothers and sisters. He taught that however we treat them, we treat Jesus himself. St. Paul of the Cross affirmed this when he saw the name of Jesus written on the forehead of the poor.

We are all heading toward this final judgment before the great King, who is the Son of God. We must be prepared. We ready ourselves by reaching out now. We cannot do everything, for sure, but we can do something. You want to have your best Lent ever? Decide upon a cause and get involved. God will use you to make a difference. But remember, charity begins at home. How you treat those you live with is key. Mother Teresa is quoted as saying: "You want to change the world? Begin in your own family." Kindness, respect, and generosity are basic tenants of Christianity.

## Get Involved!

Getting involved can place you in painful social situations and bring you into relationships that may be toxic. "My child, if you step forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for trials." (Sirach 2:1). The gospel is not about you or your comfort – it is about touching lives and saving souls. Despite difficulties, dedicate yourself to serving people. God will make a way for you. Despite any difficulties you may encounter, remember all things are possible for God and do everything that you can to touch as many people as possible. The Catholic religion is about involvement with people.

## Poorest of the Poor

There are needs everywhere. You may be able to help others by reading to poor and disadvantaged youth. There is a need for CCD teachers. Also there is a need for youth ministers. There are many lonely elderly people who would love a visit. Also, there is a need for communion ministers. Consider getting involved liturgically. Join a choir. Try volunteering at your local thrift shop or Goodwill store. The St. Vincent De Paul Society is a noble organization with a vast outreach to the poor. Start a pen pal program where you reach out to people in prison via letter writing. This program is very anonymous and impacts many. Even if you are homebound, you can reach out. Simply put, reach out and serve others.

## Our Common Home

Reaching out to those in need is everyone's call. Another area most don't give attention to in Lent is our environment. While climate change smacks of political leanings, it should not be politicized. We should all want to live in a healthier environment and leave a great legacy for future generations. Pope Francis advocates caring for our earth in his encyclical *Laudato Si*. In this controversial teaching, the Pope challenges everyone to be responsible for the care of the earth. During Lent, there is a special program which inspires and informs Christian church communities on how to use the traditional Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving to protect God's creation. The focus of the program has its participants consuming less food, water, energy, and transportation while focusing on gratitude. No matter your political persuasion, we all love the earth. Taking care of the earth is a very good way to help future generations as well as our own.

## Revolution Not Resolution

As Lent approaches, do you ask yourself: "What are you doing for Lent?" The answer may be: giving up drinking, abstaining from chocolate, watch less TV, stay off the Internet, reading more and going to church more often. These and other strategies can help you have a significant Lent. It is important that you have some type of a plan.

As you practice the traditional, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, you will open yourself up to grace. Other suggested areas are reaching out to people, being kind and forgiving with difficult people, and caring for our environment. Another possibility is to attend a parish mission wherein the goal is to create an atmosphere through prayer, music, and preaching the Word for a God encounter. Another aspect of a parish mission is that it is helping you to facilitate personal change through inspiration and reconciliation.

Going to Mass is important, but make sure it is not an end in itself. People in liturgical churches, such as Catholicism, put emphasis on "going to church" during Lent. Yes, we ought to go more often in order to worship, hear God's word, and receive communion. We express our commitment to Jesus Christ by our attendance, plus we want to learn and be strengthened. At the end of Mass, and having heard God's Word and being fed, the priest gives the great commission "go" and live well what you have received.

Hopefully full, active, and conscious participation in the Mass (and services for Protestants) will deepen us. God can and does work through our gatherings. Receiving Jesus in the Eucharist can empower us to imitate him and be Christ-like in the world. Get involved as lectors and Eucharistic ministers and in other ways empower us to become greater servants. Listening to God's Word can inspire and bring about change.

For many, it is the Word of God that is life changing. It is not just about prayers but also the Scriptures that, like a mirror, reveal who we are and where we need to change. "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12). God's living communication confronts us, convicts us, and helps change us. The Scriptures also comfort us, inspire, and draw us into greater depth in our relationship with God. Billy Graham so rightfully stated: "There is inbuilt power in the Gospel!" Paul the apostle said: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel. It is the power of God for salvation." (Romans 1:16).

In Lent there is a special emphasis on the Word of God. Each day, the selections are chosen carefully and emphasize conversion, growth, and encounter with God. We don't just need resolutions (which are so easily broken) during Lent – we need revolution. Resolution comes through our own will. Revolution and significant change comes through God's movement and manifests grace at work in our souls. All change comes through the working and power of the Holy Spirit. We must cooperate with such grace. One catalyst of the Spirit's working is the Scriptures. The Spirit and the Word work together. If you want to have a revolutionizing Lent, your best ever, read/listen to and follow the Word of God.

The Scriptures of Lent are a guidepost toward enlightenment, purification, and revolution. The selections of biblical readings provide the blueprint and navigation for us to make a great Lent. They address the issues we need to hear about and give us the solutions we need. Of course, there are daily readings throughout Lent. Some of the important readings are for Ash Wednesday (rend your hearts) as well as the Friday (true fasting) and Monday (Last Judgment) immediately following. "Humbly welcome the Word with its power to save you." (James 1:21).

If you want to make a good Lent, yes, exercise self-discipline and self-control. Devote yourself to prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Also, invest yourself in reading the Scriptures and other spiritual readings. These pillars have been the mainstay of Lent for countless millions throughout the ages. By all means, practice these things!

But don't forget what also matters – people. Remember, also, our environment. You cannot do everything, but you can do something. Above all, treat people with kindness, respect, and generosity. As you give to others, you will receive countless blessings from above. As Isaiah wrote, if you reach him, "then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall come speedily. Then you shall call, and I will answer: you shall cry, and God will say 'Here I am.' Then shall your light rise in the darkness, and your gloom be as the noonday." (Isaiah 58:8–10).

As you invest yourself in prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and reading, you will open yourself up to God's grace. In addition, as you are pro-active towards people and our environment, you will surely have your best Lent ever!

Lenten Lessons:

- Pillars of Lent: Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving
- God communicates through the Bible and spiritual books
- Confession is healing
- True Fasting: Reaching out to people
- Take care of our common home

Lenten Action:

- Three R's: Reach out to people, Recycle, Read the Bible

## Easter Duty?

The Church strongly encourages us to "go to confession" during Lent. On Ash Wednesday, we hear Paul, an ambassador of reconciliation, begging us to be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20). Officially going to confessions is called celebrating the sacrament of penance or reconciliation. You may be wondering: "Are we still required to fulfill our Easter duty?"

The concept of the Easter duty came from the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 which stated: "Every faithful person should at least once a year confess their sins in secret to a priest. With reverence they should receive at least during the Easter time the sacrament of the Eucharist." This came to be understood that you should receive the sacrament of penance sometime before Easter at least once a year. After you confess your sins and do penance, only then can you receive the Eucharist worthily in communion.

While once a year fulfills the duty, you ought to consider going to confession several times a year. "Regular confession of sin helps the individual to form their conscience better, fight against temptation, be aware of the occasions of sin, and progress in the life of the Holy Spirit." (Catechism #1458).

While some go to confession weekly, others have been away for many years. Those who don't go to confession are often burdened with guilt for having gone to communion all those times without the benefit of confession. They are afraid that the priest will be upset with them if they have not been to confession in a long time. Many have forgotten how to go and don't want to embarrass themselves. Fear and shame keep people away from the grace that is reconciliation. Confront your fear. The majority of priests are gentle, kind, and compassionate. They are not there to judge you.

How do you go to confession? Whether face-to-face or behind the screen, simply make the sign of the cross. If you want, say: "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." Tell the priest how long it has been since you last celebrated reconciliation. If you don't know exactly, give your best estimate. After having examined your conscience announce any serious (or mortal) sins as well as other sins you can think of. All sin is serious, but some are mortal as opposed to venial. (1 John 5:16).

A good suggestion is that you concentrate on three or four main areas of transgression. You don't have to make things up! Be honest and vulnerable. You are only as sick as your secrets. Healing comes when you announce even your most shameful sins.

Once you have confessed, the priest will offer some counsel and then give you a penance. The penance is not a "punishment" but a means to help you progress in holiness. The priest would then ask you to pray an "Act of Contrition." Sorrow for your sins is a pre-requisite for receiving absolution. If you do not know the traditional "O, my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you..." prayer, then compose a prayer of your own, from your heart, but make sure you say you are sorry. The priest will then absolve you from your sins "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Make the sign of the cross with him over yourself. You are then free to go in peace.

Some are afraid that if they forget a sin or leave out part of the rite, then they are making a "bad" confession. Please understand, that God looks at your heart and sees your motivation. God is not so much interested in your performing the rubrics (special rules) of the rite perfectly as he is thrilled that you came to confession! With that in mind, your confession is a good one if you forgot some things. When you do remember later, confess it to God directly, and the grace of the sacrament will suffice.

The sacrament of penance or reconciliation is a healing, resurrection sacrament. You come to lay your burdens of guilt and shame down. You experience forgiveness and reconciliation with God. You may experience a lightness and joy because you have been cleansed of your sins by God's personal love for you. Overcome your fears and worries and celebrate confession. As some say after going to confession: "Why did I wait so long?"

## The Examen

In order to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation properly, you must prepare by first examining your conscience. This inner review is best done in the hours and even days before you go to confession.

The examen, or your examination of conscience, is when you look at your heart and try to discern what is really there. We get a clue about what is within by looking at our behavior and the way we speak. We are adept at hiding issues from ourselves. Others can see them, but we don't like looking at our dark side. To identify issues, sins, or character defects, you have to be rigorously honest and courageous. Take a good look in the mirror and be totally honest with yourself. You are not trying to fool anyone or trying to look good. See what your tendencies are and confess them. "Confess your sins to one another that you may be healed." (James 5:16).

There are many "examination of conscience" forms available online. Some of the most common areas that need to be examined are: anger, idols, addictions, lust, laziness, gossip, injury, and co-dependency in relationships. With the help of the priest, try to go a step deeper and get to the root of each issue. In reconciliation you are not only seeking forgiveness but also growth. No one wants to admit their imperfections, but confession is the way to reconciliation with God and inner healing.

Lenten Action:

- No matter how long it's been, examine your conscience and go to confession

