



A Lenten Rule: What, Why & How

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A LENTEN RULE: WHAT, WHY AND HOW

WHAT IS A LENTEN RULE AND WHY BOTHER WITH IT?

A lot of Christians get nervous about the notion of “rules” and Christianity. Rules are for Pharisees, not those who are free as Christ meant us to be free. This idea is widespread among Christians outside the Catholic tradition, and the caricature of a hidebound, rule-ridden Christianity is an easy target for the thoughtless.

But the Law the rigid Pharisees lived by pales in comparison to the New Law of the Gospel. Read the Sermon on the Mount (St Matthew, chapters 5-7). Those are rules of life so hard to keep many Christians treat them more like suggestions than marching orders, but marching orders for His Church is precisely what the Lord Jesus meant them to be. The Gospel doesn't call us to an easy life of religious leisure, but a struggle to “be perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect.” Those words of Christ are embedded in His Sermon on the Mount.

If we assume He meant what He said and His call to perfection is addressed to each of us personally, that call involves us in a struggle – not with each other, but with ourselves. That struggle requires discipline and training, and *that* is what Lent is for.

So for many centuries (about 15 or 16), Christians have kept Lenten disciplines as a way of becoming more faithful disciples of our Lord (notice that “disciple” and “discipline” have the same root; just a coincidence, you think?).

If we want our Lenten observances to produce results, it would be a good idea to know what we want the results to be. If I want to go to Portland from New Braunfels, I can just start driving one day and hope I find my way there, or I can buy a map and plan out a route. Since there are 14 cities in the United States named

Portland, it would be good to know, before I even buy a map, which Portland I want to visit!

Similarly, it's fair for us to ask some basic questions about Lent. If we're gonna bother to keep it, we need to ask ourselves why we're going to keep it. What do we want to get out of it?

I joined several professional writers I know for lunch recently. One of the people at the table talked about what she was giving up for Lent. Nice as this person is, she doesn't go to church, nor does she believe in a god that makes any particular demands on her about how she lives. It goes without saying that she has no Christian discipline in her life: she's not a believer, there's no reason she should. When she made the announcement, I kept my mouth shut, but another person at the table did question her as to why she'd be doing this if she wasn't a practicing Christian. She answered with a light shrug. "Just to do it. It's good to do stuff like that." You won't be shocked to hear she was giving up chocolate for the Great Fast. Thank God for the chocolate industry Lent is sandwiched between the chocolate hearts of Valentine's Day and the chocolate bunnies of Easter!

Whatever this woman is doing, she's not keeping Lent.

The Church's goal for directing her children to keep the Great Fast is simple and twofold: first, after the Forty Days, she would be sinning less than we were when it began; second, come the Feast of the Resurrection, she wants us to be closer to God than we were before we began the Fast.

That's it. Everything we do in Lent either moves us toward these goals (which are, you can see, really just two sides of a coin) or away from them. A Lenten Rule is our plan, our roadmap, to help us reach these goals – it's your practical plan of how you'll sin less and grow in grace.

We each of us – those who've had Lenten Rules since our youth and those who've never thought about a rule – need one to take us to Easter. Traditionally the components of a Lenten Rule are

prayer, fasting and almsgiving. As of Sexagesima Sunday, there are ten days between now and Ash Wednesday. Ten days, if you haven't drawn up a rule yet, to prepare one. If you have questions or comments, send me an email, buttonhole me after church, or call me for an appointment so we can sit down and talk about it. There are few things a priest does more important, few that give him greater joy, than wrasslin' alongside a soul who's struggling with sin and reaching for grace. That's what I'm doing, too.

EMBRACING A LENTEN RULE

Customarily, the Church has three disciplines she sets in front of us at Lent: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. These are our Lenten "tools," but they're meant to be used with discernment – a means to an end – taking us toward our goal. To pray is good, but to pray with a purpose is better. To fast for fasting's sake may help you lose weight, but in and of itself won't do you much spiritual good. To give away money for generosity's sake is praiseworthy, but to give with an end in mind and with the Gospel as a guide is to deepen your life with God. There are all sorts of variants of these disciplines, but just as a hammer isn't the best tool for every job, to benefit from our Lenten exercises we need to know what it is we intend to do with Lent.

Without regular Lenten disciplines, directed where you need to go, observance of the season might be good but not profound. An ancillary benefit of a disciplined keeping of Lent is that we become more aware of ways in which our observances may be heightened—we begin to "see" opportunities to give things up, set aside pleasures, even if only for the next few minutes or the coming hour or day. As these modest opportunities present themselves, take one up now and then. Remember, you aren't doing this to show how strong your will-power is, or what a champion faster you've become, but to offer something to God. This is a gift from you to Him, something you can do right now.

Seek times of silence; become aware of and wrestle with one or two of your persistent faults. That takes self-knowledge, perseverance, honesty, humility and not a little courage – and this is exactly the task of conversion; Lent is an invitation to dethrone the distractions that keep our hearts either restless and empty or full of trash. While you're struggling with your own faults, do yourself – and the others in your life a favor – and take a break from pointing out (and perhaps relishing in) the faults of others.

Penitence—thinking about sin and reparation, temptation and discipline—is considered embarrassingly retrograde by the pervasive promoters of Christianity-lite. Lent is a time of liberating struggle, growth, of laying aside an immature and indulgent spiritual life for one of substance.

A LENTEN RULE OF PRAYER

Along with fasting and almsgiving, prayer is one of the traditional components of a Lenten rule. It's also one of the essential parts of the Christian's daily life. Certainly we pray during Lent but we pray every day (at least we should), so what does this Lenten emphasis on prayer mean?

The Church gives us prayers specially meant for Lent. The Book of Common Prayer has a special Collect to be said daily during the season, at every service of the Church. You can find it on page 124 (note the rubric beneath the Collect telling us to pray this "every day in Lent"). The Prayer Book provides special services for Lent, such as the Penitential Office. Most parishes have special services during the weekdays of Lent, as we do at St Joseph's. These services are part of ***our parish Lenten rule***.

But the liturgical prayer of the Church is only a part of our prayers. In addition to Common Prayer, there is personal prayer, the words you speak to God in the quiet (and the turmoil) of your heart. As Common Prayer is essential to our life as members of

Christ's Church, so personal prayer is necessary to each of our souls as a child of God. Both should find a place in a Lenten rule.

In addition to coming to church every Sunday ("our bounden duty" as the Prayer Book teaches us), we should look to add something of Common Prayer to our Lenten rule. Come to a weekday service—we'll have them almost daily during Lent at St Joseph's. If you aren't able to do that (being inconvenienced shouldn't prevent that once a week), then make a point every day of saying the Lenten Collect from the Prayer Book. You'll be saying it as part of our daily parish worship. Find some way to join in the Church's weekday worship, even if it's only possible at a distance.

Likewise, commit yourself to a more vigorous personal prayer for the season. In order to incorporate personal prayer into our Lenten rule, though, we need to think about how we pray when it's not Lent. What place does personal prayer have in your daily life? Do you pray every day? Do you set aside some time regularly for prayer? When? How long? How do you pray? From a book, from memory, using your own words? A combination of these? Does your prayer include words of adoration, an acknowledgment of your sins, prayer for others? Do you sometimes rattle off the words but fail to put your heart into them? There are times I've finished saying my prayers only to realize, like King Claudius in *Hamlet*, "My words fly up but my thoughts remain below."

At the best of times, our prayers are imperfectly offered. We may be distracted with random, wandering thoughts: "Uh-oh. Did I turn off the stove?" "That's where my keys are!" or "Yikes! I forgot to call him back." We may find that while we mean to address our prayer to God our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, we find thoughts of armadillos and carburetors crowding Him out. Confessing our sins can slip into a cheap and easy acknowledgment that we're "miserable sinners" without any recognition of the fact that I'm not a sinner on general principles,

but because I lied to Billy Bob yesterday, stole a cartridge of toner from work last week and angrily refused to accept the apology of my neighbor for what his dog did in my front yard. Our prayers for Uncle Umberto can degenerate into telling God what He needs to do for him.

My prayer may not be what it should be because I don't pray regularly. I may tell myself I don't have the time to give it the attention it deserves. I may even think, in the recesses of my heart, that prayer doesn't "work," that I've put money in that slot machine too many times before and the pay-off is poor. I may not pray just because I often find it boring and a waste of time. Or I may tell myself I'll do it when it's *really* important, or when I *truly* feel like it or just when I've done everything else I can think of. You've heard it before: "There's nothing we can do now but pray." We don't want God; we want Stepin Fetchit.

How does your personal prayer fail? How can it bring you closer to God? Is there anything that can be done about that? Think about how you pray now – and then pray about that! What's good and what's not so good? The Church's idea for Lent is that when Easter Day dawns, you'll be praying a bit better and your relationship with God will be a bit deeper than it is today. Now *that's* the reason for a Lenten rule of prayer.

A LENTEN RULE OF FASTING AND ABSTINENCE

The Prayer Book lays out days of fasting and abstinence on page "li" (the Roman numeral for 51) among the lists and tables near the front of the book. These are days, it says "on which the Church requires...extraordinary acts and exercises of devotion." That sounds pretty serious. What the Prayer Book doesn't do, in all the lists and tables, is tell us *how* we do it. What are we called on to do?

Simply put, fasting is to eat less than usual. That can range from eating nothing at all (that's what our Lord did during His forty days and forty nights in the wilderness – it's the basis on which

our Lenten forty days is based) to eating less than usual. If I eat five times a day and cut back to four, I can say I'm fasting.

Abstinence is to lay something aside, to give it up. We can do this permanently – I myself live a life of permanent abstinence from brussels sprouts, liver and kimchee, all of which I was forced to eat in my youth – or we can temporarily abstain from certain foods, like rich chocolate, marbled rib eye steak and butter-dipped lobster. Some of us of necessity abstain from things like alcohol or tobacco because they are dangerous for us. Some of us abstain from butter or sugar because we want to watch our weight.

There are all kinds of reasons for fasting and abstinence. The Church requires them of us not for the sake of our figures or so we can prove self-mastery. Lent is not about proving we can give up alcohol or chocolate for forty days. It's not about what we can or can't do at all. We don't "give up" something to prove we can (if that's why, we're better off failing!). We give it up as an act of devotion, a sort of physical prayer.

If I eat less for these forty days – enough less so that I can tell and my stomach grumbles in protest now and then – the grumbling itself reminds me of Lent and my Lenten sacrifice to God. If I get that craving which my body suggests that only a good bite of chocolate can assuage – I remember Lent. When I catch the enticing scent of crisping beef from my neighbor's barbeque – I'll certainly think about what I've given it up for forty days, and I might even remember why.

Our Lenten fasting and abstinence needs to be stringent enough that we'll feel it regularly. Not just food and drink, but a few things that touch our daily lives – television, computer games, Rush Limbaugh (I think Larry's almost permanently abstaining from his daily dose of Rush), whatever. I start off most mornings reading Cicero or Homer, but come Ash Wednesday I lay those texts aside till Easter Monday. What we "give up" for Lent isn't bad stuff, but good things. We "give up" so we can see beyond

our favorite foods and activities and catch a glimpse of ourselves in an eternal perspective. We're more than the sum of our likes and dislikes. When we actually stop spinning our wheels for a bit and look inside, we might be surprised at what we discover.

We fast and abstain not to prove we can do it but to offer something of ourselves – our time, our interests or our quite legitimate loves and desires, to God. He's the One we're "giving up" stuff to.

The Church requires of her children that we spend forty days and forty nights in fasting and abstinence. That's her Lenten Rule for each and all of us. But how you do it is up to you. Ancient rules call for us to give up meat (that's why a fish is the old symbol of Lent), but that's far less important than planning a Lent that touches on how you need to fast and what you need to abstain from. A bit of honest self-examination will show you what you need. Just bear this in mind – you're giving up something good for something Better. For the Forty Days, you are following the Lord Jesus' fasting and abstinence with your own. You're doing it to be with Him.

A LENTEN RULE OF ALMSGIVING

Almsgiving is one of cornerstones of Lent, but what is almsgiving? What are alms?

Alms are gifts – principally money – given to benefit others. Alms are not the same as money given to the church. It's not the same as your tithe or offering to the parish. It's not for the support of the church's ministry. Alms are given to help those in need. Our Parish Ingathering at St Joseph's – giving non-perishable foodstuffs to the New Braunfels food bank – is a form of alms.

We are duty-bound as Christians to help those in need and almsgiving is a real way to do that. It should be a regular thing in our lives. A "regular thing" means something we do regularly.

Giving alms when the mood strikes us or when a television commercial makes us tear up is neither regular nor especially virtuous. In such cases we're giving more because it makes us feel good than because we're motivated by true charity. Christian almsgiving isn't about how it makes us feel but about the needs of the poor. "When you do this to the least of my brethren," the Lord Jesus said, "you do it to me." We give for Jesus' sake and for the sake of those who suffer, where He hides.

Important as that is, though, there's another reason we give alms. We give alms so we'll have less money than we do if we *don't* give. We're giving money – the great sacrament of secular society – away. By loosening our grip on the main thing in which we put our trust (the irony of putting "In God We Trust" on our money is painfully rich), we acknowledge that our trust needs to be in the One Who clothes the lilies of the field.

It's a corruption of the Gospel when we're told that if we give money to the Church or some TV minister God will give us more money back. Such an appeal to greed flies in the face of the Lord Who often lived with no place to lay His head. When we give money away, we have less of it than we did before – AND THAT'S THE POINT! Christian giving isn't giving away some with one hand so we can take in more with the other. If we can give our money with cheerful hearts, then we're breaking the grip greed holds on our hearts and in the recesses of our fears. The grace of the Gospel first sets us free from sin, then fixes our hearts where true joys are to be found. "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Lenten almsgiving is a chance for each of us, for forty days, to practice that regularly. How much do you love money? How much of a grip does it have on you? How much do you put your trust in it to save you?

The Church doesn't say money is evil. It can be used for good or bad. It is unequivocal though, in its teaching. Money is not evil,

but St Paul says “the love of money is the root of all evil.” Lent is a time to test our love. Almsgiving is a way to purify it.

As you prepare your Lenten rule, dip your foot in the water of almsgiving. Make it a regular, if modest, part of your rule. Involve God in your money-not just by asking God for more of it, but by asking Him to show you how to get rid of some of it!

DOWN TO BRASS TACKS

Okay, so we have Lent, we have prayer, fasting and almsgiving, and we have my sins, which I know I’m supposed to fight. How do I do that?

First, think about your sins. What’s your favorite sin? The customary word for it is a “besetting sin.” It’s one that bothers me a lot because I’m tempted by it frequently and succumb to it regularly. Most of us have several sins like this.

Choose one you want to address for the days of the Fast. Understand, though, that if you do, you’re in for a struggle: you will sometimes win (or seem to) and sometimes lose (or seem to). That’s why Lent lasts more than a weekend.

Each sin has an off-setting virtue and the struggle here isn’t merely to put down the sin, but to grow in the virtue.

Here is a classic and very ancient list of virtues and the contrary sins:

humility against pride,
kindness against envy,
abstinence against gluttony,
chastity against lust,
patience against anger,
generosity against greed,
and *diligence* against sloth

Pray. Tell God what sin you struggle against and what grace you need to fight it. Make it a fixed, dally, several times a day prayer. Be ready for frequent temptations. When they come, pray. When you receive the Sacrament, pray for grace to grow and sin to shrivel.

Fast. When your stomach protests, tell God you're fasting against your besetting sin. When you know the TV show you're not watching for Lent is on, tell God why. Make your fasting part of your spiritual arsenal.

Give alms. Ask God to show you a need someone has and give to it. Tell God when you do to bless the gift and the recipient, and then ask Him to bless you in your fight against your besetting sin. If you dare, the old custom was for the giver to ask the recipient to pray for them.

If you persevere with your intention for the Forty Days, you will have *lived* your Lent, not just lived through it. You'll have some Lenten bruises and "defeats," but come Easter morning, when we sing the Triple Alleluia, you'll have a reason to rejoice with "angels and archangels and all the Company of Heaven."

May God bless you as you prepare your Rule, and give you a vigorous Forty Days of living it.