

“The purpose of Lenten discipline is to draw closer to Jesus Christ. Full stop. Growing deeper into Christ’s love is the compelling reason to give something up for Lent; and it is no coincidence that this is also the only way to succeed in doing so.”

An Awakening About Lent

I was sitting at the student worker desk when Jeffery walked into the office. He was a graduate student, I was a freshmen. We knew each other to be Christians, and we got to talking about Lent.

Jeffrey began, “I gave up red meat, poultry, and fish. It’s been an interesting few weeks.” He chuckled as he spoke. This guy was for real.

It was my turn now, and I tried to keep up. “Well, this year I wanted to take something on... So, I’ve been trying to wake up 30 minutes early to read the Bible and pray.”

“How’s it going?” Jeffrey inquired.

“I only lasted two days,” I confessed.

Jeffrey gave me a look of genuine sympathy and then asked, “Do you pray the night before?”

“Pray about what?” I asked.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, “For stuff like this you *have* to pray the night before. Pray for the strength to get through the next day. There’s no *way* I could be doing what I’m doing otherwise.”

Why Give Something Up for Lent?

What is it about Lent? What is it about 40 days (46 if you count the Sundays) that seems just short enough to survive a discipline, and yet just long enough to wonder if we’ll ever make it?

In almost every year of my life, I have embarked on a Lenten discipline, and it’s usually giving something up. One year it was sweets. Another year it was meat. Some years it has been alcohol. This year I will not check/carry around my smartphone while at home. There have been blessings, and failures, and cheating. Thanks be to God, and folks like Jeffery, there has also been a gradually developing awareness of how - and why - to go about this business.

The reason behind giving something up for Lent might seem obvious. It's basically a form of self-denial, right? We break ourselves down a bit; rough it for a few weeks. Self-denial then translates to self-improvement; we come out better, stronger. We've worked out a few bad habits, or at least built some character along the way.

In a word: no.

Results vs. Purpose

It has taken me some years to straighten this out. Thinking about Lent as self-improvement is a case of confusing results with purpose. Self-improvement - if it comes - is a *result* of giving something up for Lent. It is an outcome, and not even a necessary outcome. If Lent allows you to drop a few pounds or remove some four-letter words from your vocabulary, wonderful. On a more serious note, you may develop virtues of perseverance and moderation. But none of this is a *purpose*.

The purpose of Lenten discipline is to draw closer to Jesus Christ. Full stop. Growing deeper into Christ's love is *the* compelling reason to give something up for Lent; and it is no coincidence that this is also the only way to succeed in doing so.

Even now the language betrays me. Succeed? What is there to accomplish? We may reach Easter Sunday and pat ourselves on the back, but none of us will suppose that the God of heaven and earth is somehow impressed. After all, God doesn't care whether or not we eat chocolate, right? (This line, incidentally, has preceded my breaking many a Lenten practice...) Well, God may not care about chocolate, but God *does* care about drawing us closer - and giving something up for Lent can do just that.

Here is the point: There is no thing to accomplish in Lent, precisely because we are not talking about things. We are talking about people, and in this case, ourselves. It is our selves that Jesus is interested in. He wants us; each of us. And of each, he wants all. Jesus desires our waking, our sleeping, and everything in between. He desires to be in every thought, word, and deed. It is a tall order, and it sounds intimidating(!) The good news is that this Christian life is full of joy and grace and peace. Giving something up for Lent is one way to step into that life.

Practical Advice for Giving Up Something for Lent

There are, of course, some practical tips to staying on course. Pray the night before. Avoid

triggers. But overall, I offer very little advice except the following: give your Lenten discipline to Jesus. The temptations, the days that seem harder than others, give them to Jesus. At each fork in the road, let his image fill your vision. Let his strength bring you through.

The question was once posed to William Sloane Coffin, "This Jesus thing, isn't it all just a crutch?" He replied, "Most certainly. But who says you don't limp?"

People will ask, "I'm giving up alcohol [or coffee, or Facebook, or shopping] for Lent, do you think I'll be able to do it?" The response should be the same: "No. I do not think that you will be able to do it. But if you're asking whether Jesus can pull it off, then yes. By all means, yes. He is more than capable."

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