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The Reason behind Lenten Discipline

Lent has long been the primary time for renewing our discipleship by adopting some more rigorous discipline to heighten our spiritual awareness. The idea of discipline relates to the experience of being a disciple. The disciple is a learner, and discipline is the way of learning. It includes instruction for the mind and exercises for the body.

No matter what we decide to do for Lent, the important thing is our inner motive. As Jesus so often warned us, the outward action can be done for a wide variety of reasons. If we are going to fast merely to look good, then we are committing what the poet T. S. Eliot called “the greatest treason, to do the right thing for the wrong reason.”

The importance of discipline cannot be overestimated. Only through discipline can we achieve genuine freedom. Discipline indicates a regular pattern of training for any activity. If we wish to play the piano, for example, we must submit to the discipline of learning the finger movements to produce the correct notes. Just as many want freedom to play anything on the piano, virtuosos know that freedom only comes after long hours of disciplined practice.

So likewise, we who want freedom to live a deeper spiritual life, must remember that freedom only comes if we are willing to pay the price of learning to discipline ourselves. Fasting, abstinence and other practices that we might wish to adopt for our Lenten observance can help us to achieve our spiritual goal—freedom in Christ.

Some Lenten Practices

The Church has always had times of fasting, penitence and preparation. In the early Church, the custom of fasting before Easter was practiced, initially for only a few days at a time. It also became the tradition to set aside a time of preparation for catechumens, who would undergo a rigorous period of instruction, reflection, self-denial, scrutiny, prayer and exorcism in order to become candidates for baptism.

The Church eventually decided on a 40-day period for Lent as a reminder of the 40-day period of Jesus' fast in the desert. The length of time also recalls other 40-day or 40-year times of great significance in Jewish history:

- Noah and 40 days of rain
- Moses' fasting for 40 days before receiving the Ten Commandments
- The Israelites' wandering for 40 years
- Elijah's traveling for 40 days to reach God's holy mountain

These experiences were occasions of great spiritual cleansing and preparation to encounter God in a new way, and serve as excellent models for our Lenten disciplines and expectations. The 40-day period of Lent does not include Sundays, which are considered little Easters, feast days that celebrate Jesus' resurrection on the first day of the week.

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