

Have you ever given up something for Lent? Why did you do that? What was the purpose? I know this may seem a strange question to ask, but actually, it's a very important question to ask...of anything we do or don't do in our spiritual life. Why am I doing this? What is the purpose?

I remember, years ago, talking with a young woman about this. For the first time ever, she was giving up something for Lent – chocolate, as I recall – and she was pretty excited about it, too. So just out of curiosity, I asked her why she was doing it. And do you know what? She couldn't give me an answer – or, at least, not a very good one. She finally said she was doing it “to feel more spiritual” – which was honest, but...well...not necessarily the best motivation. For what does that really mean – “I want to feel more spiritual”? It could just be an ego trip, couldn't it? *Look at me, how spiritual I am! And how wonderful it makes me feel!* It could also be a form of self-righteousness. *Look at how much I'm sacrificing! Now I really feel like a good Christian!* In fact, wanting to feel more spiritual could get in the way of becoming more spiritual, couldn't it? Focusing more on what I feel, what I need, what I do, what I desire, instead of focusing on God. I didn't think to say this at the time, but the truth is: doing something “to feel more spiritual” is probably a temptation we should resist, not a goal we should pursue. That's not to say it's wrong to feel spiritual. Or that it's wrong to give up something for Lent. But to stay spiritually on the right track, it is important to ask why we're doing or not doing something. What is the purpose?

As it happens, this is also Isaiah's point in our text. He shows us a situation where people have been very diligent about fasting from food and drink. It seems this has made them feel very spiritual, too – so spiritual that they ask God, **“Why do we fast, but You do not see? Why humble ourselves, but You do not notice?”** Why indeed! Isaiah tells them that their problem is two-fold. They're not fasting from the things God really wants them to give up, and they're not fasting for the reasons God desires. The truth, Isaiah tells them, is that **“you are just serving your own interests.”**

And that is always a danger in the spiritual life – to do religious things but do them in a way that just serves our own interests. That's how worship becomes mainly about me feeling revved up and inspired. That's how service becomes mainly about me feeling fulfilled and appreciated. That's how tithing becomes mainly about me feeling entitled to having things done my way. That's how Bible study becomes mainly about me feeling wiser and deeper than others. Now, obviously there's nothing wrong with these activities in themselves. The danger is in our motivation! Though religion is not supposed to be about me, me, me, that is where we naturally focus: on what makes me feel good, what makes me feel superior, what serves the interests of me, me, me! So if we're serious about faithfulness to God, we need to watch our focus carefully. We need to question why we're doing or not doing something. We need to ask: What is the purpose?

In Isaiah's day, people don't seem to have asked this. As a result, their behavior seems amazingly obtuse. To fast, yet oppress your workers? To fast "**only to quarrel and fight**"? How could they not see the hypocrisy? But you know the old saying: *"There are none so blind as those who will not see."* And that's also a trait of our fallen nature. Not just focusing on me, me, me, but not wanting to admit we focus on me, me, me. In fact, back then when people heard Isaiah's rebuke, I'll bet some thought to themselves, *"You tell 'em, preacher! That's exactly the way certain other people operate!"* – without ever asking if they might operate that way themselves. We don't want to make the same mistake. With 20/20 hindsight, it's easy to see the problem back then: not fasting from the things God wanted them to give up; not fasting for the reasons God desired. But can we also see how Isaiah's words might apply to ourselves? Discerning that is the real challenge in studying this text – what God want us to fast from, what God wants us to fast for. Discerning that is also the challenge of Lent.

When it comes right down to it, Isaiah's message is very practical. It's a call to give up things that harm others – to fast from injustice, enslavement, oppression. And it's a call to fast for things that help others – food for the hungry, shelter for the homeless, clothing for the naked, and so forth. Obviously, there is a strong emphasis here on social justice, and we don't want to overlook it. Especially in our current economic situation, we Christians need to stretch ourselves a bit more to help those who cannot help themselves.

But there is also a broader principle here we don't want to miss, either – fasting from all that displeases God and fasting for the reasons God desires. I mean, wouldn't it be ironic if all we got out of this text was a chance to pat ourselves on the back, because, unlike the people back then, we feel so committed to social justice, we feel so compassionate toward the poor!? Wouldn't it be ironic if our response merely echoed a certain character in one of Jesus' parables: *"I thank You, God, that I am not like other people are, especially people back then – uncaring, misguided, politically incorrect. I always vote the right way, I sign petitions on every conceivable issue, and now and then I even donate a few bucks to Lutheran Community Services!"* Man, would that be missing the point! Isaiah would roll over in his grave! Besides the sheer arrogance, think how many other things we'd be overlooking! After all, there are many kinds of injustice, aren't there? Not just social or political. Ask anyone who's been a victim of slander, abuse, unreasonable demands, unrealistic expectations. Likewise, there are many ways to enslave people – with neediness, for instance, or coddling, or stereotypes, or guilt. There are other ways to oppress people, too – like with carping, grudges, put-downs, indifference. And these are just the tip of the iceberg! So the point here is to open our eyes fully, examine ourselves closely, and not just pat ourselves on the back but zero in on the things that do not deserve a pat on the back, then ask how we might use the season ahead to deal with them – deal with them in a spirit of fasting from and fasting for.

Just to give an example, I happen to know of a guy who gave up **sarcasm** for Lent. Now, that may not sound monumental, but sarcasm was a real problem for him – and for the people in his life. Early on, he had learned this as kind of a defense mechanism; learned how to shred people with a few choice words – and, as if that weren't hurtful enough, when people objected he could inflict even more wounds by saying, "What's the matter? I was only joking! Can't you take a joke?" Well, over time this caused a lot of wear and tear on his relationships – especially on his marriage. Things finally came to a head one day when a few choice words reduced his little boy to tears. "You just can't help it, can you?" his wife scolded him. "It's bad enough that you do it to me, but to a defenseless kid – your own son! That's sinking pretty low!" And it was. Sarcasm had become such an engrained habit that he didn't even realize what hurtful things he was saying. "I know I was wrong," he told his wife. She just looked at him. "I know I need to change." Again, she just looked at him. "And I will change," he promised, "I will." With that, she lowered her eyes and said, "Prove it." That's how he happened to give up sarcasm for Lent. Mind you, it wasn't just a frivolous thing – like giving up chocolate, say, or coffee. He was fasting from hurtful behavior but also fasting for a better way of relating to people he loved very deeply. And, of course, Lent was just the beginning of this – but a good beginning. It involved more than just watching his tongue. No, it involved prayer – for help in overcoming the sarcasm. It involved reflection – understanding why he resorted to sarcasm. It involved confession – not just to God but to people he had hurt. It also involved receiving forgiveness – from God, from others, and even from himself. So some good things came out of giving up sarcasm for Lent. He experienced real spiritual growth by dealing with this problem in a spirit of fasting from and fasting for.

What's most important in this example is that the guy zeroed in on a real problem in his life and dealt with it. That's also what we're called to do during Lent. Some may choose to give up sweets for Lent – but why? What's the purpose? Unless they have a real hold on us, that's not the best use of this time. We want to tackle something that is a real problem.

For instance, might we be harboring some negative attitudes? Why not give them up for Lent? A grudge, perhaps – a grudge that seems so justified, because whatever the person did was so wrong. Why not give up that grudge for Lent? It doesn't mean you have to say whatever happened was really okay. That's not what forgiveness means. And it doesn't mean you have to be best buddies with the person you've held the grudge against. That's not what forgiveness means. But it does mean not nursing the anger against that person. It does mean not treating them badly. It does mean not wallowing in resentment – what happened in the past, and how unfair it was, and how much it hurt, and on and on and on! Instead, it means cleansing that "gunk" out of your heart and mind – truly giving it up. And hard as that might be, think what it will do for you! Regardless of how the other person reacts, fasting from that grudge will keep it from corroding your spirit, from darkening your attitude, and from damaging your

other relationships. It will free you for a healthier mindset and for healthier relationships – including a healthier relationship with God. Now, that's a lot more than giving up chocolate can do for you! It's definitely worth the effort! Some real spiritual growth can come from dealing with negative attitudes in a spirit of fasting from and fasting for.

Or, going in a very different direction, maybe we have a problem with time management. We just don't have quality family time. Or we just don't have time to keep up friends and relatives. Or we can't even carve out prayer time with God. If that's a problem, then how about using Lent to zero in on time-wasters? This may sound extreme, but for instance, how about **giving up TV** for Lent? Yes, it could be hard fasting from beaucoup hours in front of the tube, but think how much time that would free up, and think what you could use that time for! Actual conversations. Having fun with friends and loved ones. Writing the letters you keep meaning to write. Having a daily quiet time, family devotions. Even getting involved in some worthwhile project – like building a house with *Habitat for Humanity*, something like that. Just a little thing like giving up TV could open up all kinds of possibilities – and lead to better stewardship of time. So here, too, there could be some real growth if done in a spirit of fasting from and fasting for.

There are lots of other options, too. The question is what would be most helpful at this particular point in our lives. So in that respect, Lent is like having an annual check-up. When we go in, we wouldn't expect a doctor to just arbitrarily prescribe anything. Like: "Give up two luxuries and call me in the morning." No, we'd expect the doctor to examine us carefully, and if he discovers any problems, to let us know what they are, and prescribe specific ways of dealing with them. It's the same with Lent. This is a time to examine our lifestyles, our habits, our attitudes; to identify any problems in our spiritual lives; and to work on whatever needs to change. That work may not be fun. It may not even feel spiritual. But there will be good reasons for doing it, and a very clear purpose. It can lead to greater spiritual health and real personal growth if it's done in a spirit of fasting from and fasting for. Amen.