

LET'S KEEP LENT!

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Mark 8:34-35

I think it was Mark Twain who said everyone talks about the weather, but no one ever does anything about it! I have a hunch that if Mark Twain were living today, he would make a similar observation about our observance of Lent. It is often talked about, but very few of us *do* anything about it, at least when it comes to allowing it affect our lives.

I suppose one reason for this is that traditionally we have come to think of Lent as primarily a program of the Roman Catholic church. In our resistance against some of the overtones which have been given to it, we have ignored almost completely a practice which Protestants in general and Baptists in particular could well afford to follow.

As Baptists, we are rather proud of our doctrine of individual freedom and I certainly am not suggesting we toss that doctrine out the window. To reject the freedom of the individual conscience under God would be taking away one of the great foundation stones upon which our Baptist faith is built. But in some ways, we have been guilty of emphasizing that one truth to the exclusion of many equally important truths, one of which is mentioned by John in our text.

Deliberate self denial for the gospel's sake.®

The Cross in Our Life.

The important word in that last sentence is *Deliberate*®. The cross for Jesus was a matter of deliberate choice. It was something He did when He could have done otherwise. He willingly chose to die for the sake of others that, through His death, they might have life.

If we're going to understand the meaning of the cross in our life, we must see it in that context. We must realize that when we take up our cross as disciples of Christ, it means we are

deliberately choosing something *which could have been avoided*. The picking up of a burden we did not have to carry unless we chose to.

When we approach Lent in that spiritCwhen we approach this period of self-discipline and renewal as a matter of deliberate choiceCwhen we AKeep Lent@, not because we must, but because we *may*, then it opens for us a whole new vista of life which remains hidden from our eyes as long as we continue to wander about in the valley of self-indulgence. Of course,

There Is Danger in Keeping Lent.

There is always the risk that we will allow the means to become the end. That's what happened in the early years of the Christian church.

Historically, Lent finds its roots in the experience of Jesus who fasted forty days in the wilderness. And if, even for a moment, we have ever wondered whether Christ could have any sense of compassion for our human frailties, any veil of doubt is quickly brushed away as we witness those forty days in the desert when he battled self into submission.

Whatever His struggles might have been, one thing is sure:

they were real and not theatrical.

Therefore, we do not have a Savior who stands aloof from our struggles, indifferent to the warfare that rages on within us for, in the liquid beauty of Paul's matchless phrase,

AHe was touched with the feelings of our infirmities.@

When the early Christians saw the superb self-mastery of Jesus, they sought to follow His example. Through prayer and fasting, they struggled to conquer self. At first it was a purely personal thing. It was something they did deliberately out of a sense of longing for a deeper life.

Then, about 150 years after the death of Jesus, a liturgical movement gripped the infant Christian

church. The ecclesiastical leaders took the experience of Christ in the desert and made a ritual of it. They established specific times of fasting and penitence. They adopted rules of abstinence and minute details of observance.

As so often happens when people try to ritualize a spiritual experience, the means became the end. By taking an experience and making it a custom, it ceased to be an experience. Over the centuries, Lent gradually deteriorated into a rather mechanical method of gaining indulgence and special merit.

AlInventing Lent.©

Following the Reformation, some of the more earnest churchmen began to recognize the importance of this pre-Easter period of physical and spiritual preparation. Gradually, Protestants joined hands with their Catholic brothers in Are-inventing Lent@as it were, allowing it to provide an opportune time for the enrichment of their spiritual lives.

Today millions of Christians, from almost every segment of the church, deliberately choose to deny themselves during Lent. For this one special season they attempt something in the way of Christian discipline which will help them learn the mastery of self.

It is in that spirit that I say to you this morning,

ALet's Keep Lent.©

Let's look upon it as a period of penitence and renewal. A period of self-discipline and denial which will prepare us for a life which is vastly richer and deeper than we have known before.

Our Motivation

I suppose one reason for keeping Lent is that somewhere, deep within us, there lies the vague premonition that we are not getting out of life all we should and could. That there is a fuller, richer meaning to it. That life as we know it is somehow, somewhere, some way missing its vital edge.

Unfortunately, there is no easy answer to this hard problem. It would be nice if some wise prophet could draw up an elaborate system of religious rulesCspelled out in minute detail disciplines we could meticulously follow for the next forty daysCbeing assured that by doing we could gain the life abundant.

But such is not the case. We are not all alike. What is the need of one is not the need of another. What is the answer for one is not the answer for another. That's why I do not come to you this morning with some specific sacrifice to suggest for Lent. The cross Jesus asks you to carry is peculiarly your own and demands a sacrifice that is a sacrifice for you.

Let me see if I can develop this idea a little further, and in a way that will help make your Lenten sacrifice a spiritually stimulating one.

In a very broad sense, all of us tend to fall into two general physical categories which medical men call hyper-thyroid and hypo-thyroid. The range of normalcy within these two classifications is very broad. As a matter of fact, anyone with a basal metabolism rating anywhere between -10 to +10 is within that range of normalcy. But only an infinitesimal number of people actually rate 0 on their basal metabolism meaning they are neither plus nor minus in their thyroid condition.

So broadly speakingCin the really general senseCall of us tend to fall into one of those two categories and we are more-or-less hyper or hypo-thyroid.

The hyper-thyroid is an activist. He or she is energetic, vigorous, alert, agile, sometimes even bustling.

The hypo-thyroid is a non-activist. He or she is sluggish, quiescent, contemplative. They are not lazy or slothful, but they definitely have to drive themselves into activity, because by nature they are non-activists.

Now, the fascinating thing about all this is that our response to the challenge of the Christian life in many waysCand I hasten to qualify this statement because any generalization like this can be dangerously misinterpretedCbut generally speaking, our response to the challenges of the Christian life tend to reflect our physical characteristics.

In other words, the hyper-thyroidCthe activistCfinds it relatively easy to respond to a call to do some worthwhile service. But the hardest thing in the world for her to do is to sit serenely in an attitude of worship. Meditation and quiet soul-searching seem like such a terrible waste of time to her, because there is so much to do and she is anxious to get it done.

On the other hand, almost any task is a hard task for the hypo-thyroidCthe non-activist. The challenge to service falls heavy on his ears and he resents being told there is a job only he can do, so if he doesn't do it, it will never get done. But he=s quick to respond to an appeal for the contemplative life. That=s Aduck soup@ for him. He Aeats it up@ and is eager for a life of meditation and quiet tranquility.

Now there=s nothing Awrong@ in either case. Two totally different types of people are simply responding to Christian stimuli in ways which reflect their physical characteristics.

However, God has wisely given us a kind of built-in spiritual barometer so that even though we do the thing that comes relatively easy for us, both the activists and the non-activists among us seem to sense there is something more to life than either of us is experiencing and there is a way of life vastly richer and fuller than our present Apartial@ existence.

Sometimes we try to resolve this conflict between what we are and what we feel we ought to be by criticizing those who are different from us. We hear the activists call the non-activists Alazy@ and the non-activists call the activists Ashallow.@" But these are just rationalizations, and dangerous rationalizations, too. The hard facts of the case are that each of us, be we activists or non-activists, must have both of these elements if we are to experience the abundant life. It is not

a case of A either/or@, but A both/and@.

Our Actualization

It's here that self-discipline, which is the true essence of Lent, becomes important. For the hyper-thyroid who expresses his Christian faith in constant bursts of bustling activity must learn that superficial activityCgo-go-goCis not adequate for life unless it is balanced with a sense of direction that can only come through the discipline of the contemplative life. Through prayer and thoughtfulness, the activists must learn the art of peaceful, unhurried living.

On the other hand,

meditation,

prayer,

faith and

thoughtful soul-searching

are useless unless they are translated into holy activity for the world good. If the hypo-thyroid becomes a maudlin dallier, then she, too, misses life at its best. She must see that bovine complacency simply has no place in a world so full of tragic need, and her sense of inner-sureness and tranquility must be balanced by a life of active service. For, as the book of James makes clear: AFaith without works is dead.@

Well, by now, if I know anything about human nature, each of you has catalogued yourself. Like the woman who was told by her doctor, AOne problem with women is that they always personalize things.@ To which she replied, AI don't!@ Well, to be perfectly fair, we all personalize what we hear. That's the way we're made. I have a notion that, if not consciously at least subconsciously, at the mention of the contemplative life the activists among you said,

ASame old stuff. Let's quit all this spiritualizing and get on with
the work.@

And, with the mention of a life of service, the non-activists among you gave a tired sigh and mentally complained about the demands the church is constantly placing upon you. But you see, the purpose of Lent is to help all of us to rouse our sluggish soul from sleep. For whether we be

activists or non-activists, there is one whole side of our life which needs developing. We will not succeed in stretching that shrunken half of our soul without a struggle.

We are all very like the little bugs who live beneath the rocks. Whenever their rock is overturned, they run for cover. They don't like to be disturbed. *And neither do we!*

None of us likes to be disturbed.

None of us really likes to submit to discipline.

None of us really likes to change our attitudes.

By and large we are a race of Arut-walkers.® We fall into an agreeable groove of doing things and trudge along in it forgetting that:

A rut is little more than a grave with the ends kicked out.®

And yet, while none of us likes to change, we are constantly being reminded by that faint whisper within that we need to change. Life at its best is passing us by. And that's where Lent comes in.

For forty days we are challenged to submit to some act of self-discipline which will open the door to that better life which Christ promised we could have. For forty days we are challenged to experiment in what we ought to be doing all the time:

Learning more and more of what it means to be like Christ in the mastery of self.

I don't know a great deal about gardening. I'm afraid I wasn't blessed with a green thumb. But I do know this:

Flowers never reach their rarest beauty so long as the soil about them is clogged with weeds.

And even as the gardener, by weeding her garden, makes it possible for her flowers to fully bloom, so, too, in Lent we are challenged to reach down into the garden of our heart where grows the Rose of Sharon, and painstakingly pluck out the weeds of worldliness which would choke off its life.

But what is even more important, during Lent we seek to add to the soil of our soul those spiritual ingredients which are lacking and

without which this fairest of all flowers will never fully grow.

Is it not true that those people who have really blessed us are those rare souls who by painful pruning and careful cultivation, have allowed their Christian character to develop fully? Of course! These are they who have outgrown their Anatural@ inclinations and by rigorous self-discipline have balanced their lives. They no longer live Apartial@ lives and every association with them leaves us richer. So --

Let's Keep Lent!

In asking you to do that this morning, I'm not making any specific demands. The details of the sacrifice are up to you. I simply want to suggest that when Jesus said:

AIf any man would come after me let him deny himself and take up
his cross@,

He was referring to a real cross.

It was a cross which meant death for him and, likewise, it will mean death for you.

Death to everything that keeps you from Him.

Death to all entanglements that make it difficult, if not impossible, to follow Him.

Death to that side of your being which needs to die.

The details of this sacrifice are up to you. But may I give you one broad hint? Search out that area in you which is most resistant to change. Which Agets your dander up@ at the mere thought of things being any different than they are. Where your violent reactionCyour quickness to argue the pointCis conscious proof of the unconscious fact that here is something which has become far too important to you.

Pick out the area of your life which is most reluctant to change and
get to work there. For while it's there you will have your greatest
struggle, it's also there you will have your greatest victory.

The meaning of Lent is that you are to take up your crossCthe thing which will cost you somethingCand willingly, deliberately, courageously bear it up the hill of your own private

Calvary so that, in the end, Lent will culminate in a glorious Easter.

ALet me keep Lent!
Let me not kneel and pray,
Forego some trifle every day,
Fast...and take Communion...and then
Lend tongue to slander,
Hold ancient grudge, deny
The very Lord whom I would glorify.

ALet me keep Lent!
Let my heart grow in grace,
Let thy light shine ~~till~~ my illumined face
Shall be a testament read by all men
That hate is buried,
Self crucified, new-born
The spirit that shall rise on Easter morn.®