

MORNING PRAYER
THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT
03.12.23

Giving up sin during Lent—actually, assuming the responsibility for trying to conform ourselves to God’s wishes for us—is a demonstration of our devotion to God and His commands. It is a way for us to worship God, by acknowledging to Him and, most importantly, to ourselves, that we are His creation and, as such, beholden to Him for everything good that we have.

In today’s Second Lesson, the Apostle refers to the people of God as temples to God: “*Know ye not that ye are the temple of God[?]*”, He asks. Not only are we the creation of God, but the Church of which we are an integral part is God’s own temple as well. Christ is the foundation and builder of that Church, and we each are part of the whole.

Because we are part of that one Church, “*the Spirit of God dwelleth in [us]*”, as Paul says. We bear responsibility always for the preservation and growth of that temple, and during this season of Lent, we are encouraged to consider more fully how we can remove from it the dirt that befouls it—that is, to eliminate from ourselves the sin that besmirches us in order to lead more holy lives. As we more and more fully follow God’s plan for our lives, letting go of our sin, our joy in the indwelling of the Lord increases.

This is why we should not find the Lenten season a time for gloom, but rather a time for joyful focus on growing closer to God. We are not so much giving up as we are letting go of sins and replacing them with fidelity to God.

As in most things, there is a counter side as well. “*If any man defile the temple of God,*” Paul says, “*him shall God destroy.*” Those who attack the Church, those who try to lead the children of God astray, those who introduce false doctrines, errors and heresies—they will be destroyed.

This Lenten season is, then, an opportunity for us to each examine our lives, to purge ourselves of errors and sin. The reason for this reaction is simple: “*[for] the temple of God is holy.*” If we realize that we are the temple of God, then it is obvious that God cannot permit corruption within His own house.

Now, there are some who would try to escape this reality. We all know that there are people who try to excuse any kind of behavior, and heresy, any false teaching, proclaiming God’s word obsolete and out of touch with current popular political, social, and artistic notions. Even formerly mainstream denominations of the Church have abandoned the clear teaching of God and substituted their own social doctrines.

They are quite correct when they say that their positions are not in agreement with God's word. What they somehow fail to point out is that God's word has not changed. It is they who have shifted aimlessly from philosophical point to point. It is they who are drifting in the seas of doubt. Think for a moment of those "Global Positioning Systems" that are now so popular in new cars. Then ask yourselves, of what value would such a "GPS" device be, if it could not be counted on to show the actual position of one's car or the true direction in which one wishes to travel? Well, religious sects that have abandoned God's clear directions are even more useless than would be such a defective GPS.

Paul quickly condemns this kind of esoteric theological nonsense: "*Let no man deceive himself,*" he says. Don't be fooled by notions of doing social good at the expense of abandoning the Word of God. Just a few years ago, a once-major religious organization formally urged its members to do just that, to ignore the message of God's Word in favor of social prescriptions drafted by mere men. It suggested officially that on Good Friday its people no longer meditate upon Our Lord's last journey by praying the Stations of the Cross. Instead, it said, they should substitute for that tradition of recollecting His Sacrifice for us some newly written reflections upon the international economic recommendations that the United Nations organization calls its "Millennium Development Goals", which deal with foreign aid to allegedly poor countries. Could there be a clearer example of how some let the spirit of the age supersede the Holy Spirit?

Spreading error, heresy and discord among the people is defiling God's temple and Paul has already stated what the results of that are: "*If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy.*" Instead of blindly wandering down these paths to perdition, simply follow the Word of God. "*If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world,*" Paul suggests, "*... let him become a fool that he may be wise.*"

Not wise in the sense that the world generally recognizes wisdom, of course, but wise in the following of the Word of God. In order to follow Jesus Christ, one must acknowledge his own failures, folly and sin. He must renounce the world and depend instead on Jesus. This is generally thought of as folly by the world. Obeying the laws of God is considered absurd by the so-called intellectuals, who would replace God's Word with their own, and God's wisdom with their own.

But as Paul says, "*the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God,*" and, "*the Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain.*" Our Lord calls instead for the faith of a child, "*for of such is the kingdom of heaven.*" Notice that Christ did not call for the wisdom of the teachers, or the philosophers, nor even of the leaders of the church, but for the faith of children.

One way we can do this is to remain focused on the Word of God. Don't get caught up in the arguments, the positions, the errors of man. *"Therefore let no man glory in men,"* Paul says. Men may be false teachers, whose wisdom, learning, and eloquence beguiles and ensnare the mind. Don't get caught up in personal disputes, contests and comparisons. Don't let the quest for glory among even ministers to distract from the real point—the real issue—which is the Word of God.

After all, the gifts which are granted to men come not from themselves, nor by their own efforts, but through Jesus Christ, for the benefit of others. All the gifts of God are given to His people. All the blessings and good things of the world are given to God's saints. But it is the gifts of God that we value, not the creations of man.

Even our very lives and death are given to us by God, that we might reflect Him through our lives. As Paul states, *"Therefore let no man glory in men. For all things are yours; whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours."*

In the face of this tremendous gift, then, we must consider our lives and our relationship with God. We must consider whether it is for His glory that we live, or for our own. We must question whether we are living into God's will, and preserving and building our lives as God's temple, or defiling the temple of God. Remember those words at which wise men tremble: "*If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy.*"

Paul reminds us that we have every reason to honor God's command and will. "[*And*] *ye are Christ's,*" he says, "*and Christ is God's.*" This time of Lent gives us the opportunity and encouragement to examine our lives, to make sure that we are following His will. We are encouraged as we move through Lent to consider whether we honor or defile the temple that we are.

As we move towards the pinnacle of the church year—the quite literally "awe-filled" reality of the Passion followed by the incomparable joy and triumph of Easter—we need to spend time considering whether we show forth our Lord in our lives. We must examine ourselves and identify those areas where we fail Him by allowing earthly concerns to cloud our focus. Wherever we find those failures, we must take steps to remove them from our lives.

This is what we should be “giving up” during Lent. And as we move beyond the forty days of Lent, we can proceed to the rest of our lives without those sins as our baggage. Giving up our sins during Lent is a demonstration of our devotion to God and His commands. It is a way for us to worship God, by recognizing that we are His creation.

Let us pray.

Precious Savior, as we consider the forty days You spent praying before beginning Your Earthly ministry, and the sacrifices You made for us, we are humbled and awed. Help us to follow that example of diligent preparation, so that we may find the courage, the strength and the devotion to make the changes we need to make to be profitable servants unto You. Grant us the wisdom to understand Thy chastening hand, and the grace to find joy in the purification of Lent. This we pray of Thy Mercy.

Amen.

Written by: Larry Wagoner, MSW
Presented by: Ted Randall, Lay Reader