

***1 Cor. 9:26-27 (KJV)***

*I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: <sup>27</sup>But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.*

Here we are again in the Pre-Lent season with the unpronounceable Sunday names. This year we have had the shortest Epiphany season I can remember and Lent is on top of us.

Pre-Lent is those three weeks just preceding Lent itself. The modern church calendar has dropped this ancient period of time for some reason or another but it is at a loss,

Pre-Lent gives us a little time to get ready for Lent, to “gear-down” so to speak. With Lent being the season where we attempt to walk closer to God in anticipation of Easter, pre-Lent is when we are getting ready to make the Lenten journey, the time to pack our gear, mark our maps to loosen up our legs for the trip.

There are three traditional aspects to our Lenten journey; fasting and abstinence, prayer and almsgiving.

What I would like to do this year is to take the three Sundays of pre-Lent and look at each one of the facets on each of the Sundays. Today, let's talk about fasting and abstinence.

There is a difference in fasting and in practicing abstinence. Fasting is generally thought of as not eating, period, for a day or whatever amount of time. Abstinence is avoiding certain foods or food groups, such as a vegetarian would avoid eating meat.

There are many of us who abstain from red meat on Fridays, as an example.

Why fast? Why abstain from certain foods? What has that to do with being a Christian?  
What has that to do with Lent?

Those of us who do abstain from red meat on Fridays do it as a minor sacrifice to remind ourselves of the many millions of people who do not have enough to eat. To practice this along with some form of fasting is even better.

Since Lent is a time of reflection on our relationship with God, this is a good time to see if fasting and abstinence may become part of the Christian disciplines that we need to adopt for Lent and maybe to adopt it as a part of our normal way of living in Christ on a continuing basis.

Fasting and abstinence have been part of the Christian disciplines for ages. Although there is no scriptural commandment on fasting, our Lord made reference to the practice in **Matthew 6:16-18 (ESV)** *"And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup>But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup>that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

And again in **Matthew 9:15 (ESV)** *And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.*

This strongly indicates that fasting was in fact a practice, if not directly, was indirectly endorsed by our Lord.

We need to fast not only from food but from the excesses of daily modern life. We need to abstain from those things in our life that come between us and God.

Richard Foster in his book, Celebration of Discipline, writes, *More than any other*

*Discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately. David said, **Psalm 69:10 (ESV)** When I wept and humbled my soul with fasting, it became my reproach. Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear - if they are within us, they will surface during fasting.*

Fasting purges us of those things in our lives that we need to get rid of. Abstinence reminds of those things that we should be aware of.

How should we fast? How do we fast? This can be as severe as refraining from all food for a day, just having juice, to cutting back to only one real meal for the day. It depends on yourself and what you are able to do physically. In fact, you may not actually be able to fast if your physical condition cannot accept it. And that is alright, too.

Lent is a good time to begin to practice any spiritual discipline. As St. Benedict wrote in his Rule (Chapter 49 - The Observance of Lent) *The life of a monk ought to be a continuous Lent.* We ought to paraphrase that as *The life of a Christian ought to be a continuous Lent.*

St. Benedict goes on to write in the same chapter, *During these days (Lent) therefore, we will add to the usual measure of our service something by the way of private prayer and abstinence from food or drink, so that each one of us will have something above the assigned measure to offer God of his own will with the joy of the Holy Spirit.*

So when we talk of adding fasting or abstinence to our Lenten observance it is in a spirit of joyfully doing more for God, not in some sour adherence because “we have to.”

Think about it when you are considering how you are going to make your Lenten journey this year.

