

# Why I (Sometimes) Observe Lent

John R. Perfect

Lent, as it is often observed today, is a self-imposed restriction or fast observed during the days prior to Easter. There is variation in exactly how long the fast is observed, but is commonly forty days of fasting (usually not counting Sundays) ending anywhere from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. Many groups differentiate from the Lenten Fast prior to Good Friday and the Paschal Fast observed starting Good Friday and broken on Easter.

While the practice is often associated with the Catholic church, some Christians observed a forty-day fast prior to Easter as early as 180 A.D.

I recently discussed Lent with several friends. Some of them had an immediate negative feeling toward the practice because they viewed it as a Catholic practice. Others were shocked that the practice would be dismissed out of hand because of its association with Catholicism instead of being evaluated on its own merit. The discussion made me start trying to explain how I've found the practice beneficial.

We are generally a comfortable people, and intentionally limiting our own pleasure can be helpful. Were we not living in a fallen world with selfish desires, fasting would be unnecessary. We would always have our focus on God and be devoted only to Him. Unfortunately, we have the nature of Adam that seeks to please the flesh, and we are surrounded by the cares and temptations of a sinful world.

Fasting gives us a special opportunity to refocus on Jesus, seeing Him clearly while the world around us shouts for our attention. It is an opportunity to quiet the noises of everyday life, and remind ourselves that God holds a place higher than anything else in our existence. It provides a tool for training our hearts to grow in love for Christ and training our desires to submit to His.

I'm sure I could find those benefits of fasting in any season of the year, the problem is, I generally don't. The spiritual growth I've experienced while fasting in the days before Easter could just as well been found fasting the forty days after, but I somehow don't get around to starting an extended fast most other times.

I like the symbolism of a forty-day fast as I reflect on my Saviour who walked the earth as a man and was tempted like I am. But for me, the real strength of placing a fast in the Lenten season comes from its simple repeating structure. Every spring I am reminded to evaluate my habits and lifestyle, to find the unnecessary or worthless things that distract me or simply fill my time.

These fasts are not always dietary, but I try to find something that is taking my time or is simply an unnecessary pleasure. I've benefitted from abstaining from indulgences like sweets, soda, or reading the news. Through restricting myself for a period of time I can sometimes find areas that should have a long-term change.

The years I've observed Lent I've also found myself much more conscious of Easter, and my thoughts more readily turned toward sacrifice.

I don't think Lent is a practice we need to turn into a broad tradition in the Anabaptist churches, but we do need to keep denying self and pursuing God. I use the Lenten season as a tool to help me refocus on God, which leads to a more vibrant walk with Him and helps me sacrifice my habits of self-indulging.