**Lenten Discipline**

Based on [Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Mt6.1)

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Ash Wednesday

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When you were baptized, you took a vow of renunciation. “Do you renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways?” “Yes, I renounce them.” Even if you were an infant at the time, someone else confessed this on your behalf. St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:2, “We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.”

To renounce something is to put it aside voluntarily. All Christians are called to put aside disgraceful and underhanded ways, every day, all the time. **They are to resist the devil and his temptations. They are to put aside anything that might grieve the Holy Spirit who is at work in them.** They are to put aside what Scripture calls “the works of the flesh.” “Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these” (Galatians 5:19-20).

Renouncing the flesh is a daily struggle, because our flesh-not meaning skin and bones-but our sinful nature still clings to us. The Holy Spirit was given to you when you were baptized into His Name, made holy and given a new heart. Jesus Christ reconciled you to God, so that you can worship and serve him without fear. Sin no longer has dominion over you, truly. But it is a great mistake to think that you can let your guard down and think that your sin is ever far enough in the rear view mirror to be ignored or forgotten.

So we don a smear of cross-shaped ashes on our forehead today as a reminder that we are still marked by sin and death in this life. These ashes are only a symbol--an acknowledgment of our sin—to remind us that, though we are more than conquerors through Christ, our sinful nature still cleaves to us, and we have to fight against it.

Scripture tells us that we take an active part in this struggle with the flesh by exercising self-control. St. Paul says, “**Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified**” (1 Cor 9:25-27).

Paul is not talking about physical exercise here--though that is good for you too. **He’s talking about how Christians do well to be engaged in spiritual exercises. Exercises in voluntary self-denial and self-sacrifice. This means, not only renouncing sin and the flesh which we are to do always, but also renouncing things that aren’t sinful, for a time; so that you may be practiced to exercise self-restraint and self-control when temptations do come. And they will come so long as this world and its prince continue to prowl around us. So exercise, be sober-minded and ready for battle.**

In preaching the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus assumes his disciples will be about three such spiritual disciplines (Matthew 6). He teaches them how to “fast”,--that, is deny yourself food or some other thing you desire. Fasting is not done to lose weight and stay healthy, but to ***renounce your appetites*** and keep them in check. He teaches them how to “pray”—to speak their requests and concerns to God. Prayer is done not because God needs to be informed of your needs before he can help you, but in order to ***renounce your will*** to serve his will. As Jesus prayed to his Father, “**Not my will but yours be done**” (Luke 22:42). And finally, Jesus teaches how to give alms; that is to give money to those in need. This is not done to solve the problem of poverty or so others can witness your generosity, but in order to ***renounce your possessions***, sacrificing them in service to your neighbor. And your heavenly Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.

Fasting is always a good practice and fine outward training. Prayer is essential to the Christian life. And almsgiving is a natural consequence of loving your neighbor. During Lent, however, the church invites believers to increase their practice in such things, to renounce more than you have to, but only for a limited time (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:5). Only, Jesus warns not to do them to be seen by others, praised and honoured by men. It is not about increasing your holiness, or about earning God’s favour; it is about preparing for when unforeseen struggles and temptations do come, that you can bear and resist them joyfully, knowing that whatever earthly treasures Satan would deprive you, you have an imperishable treasure in heaven.

Jesus says, “**anyone who would come after me must deny himself and follow me**.” Following Jesus is self-denial. There’s no better way to show your flesh who your real master is, than by denying its commands and its urges in the name of your true Lord and master Jesus Christ. *Sins master is not your master*; its law is not your law. You cannot get rid of your flesh; but you don’t have to obey it, and you can bridle with the Spirit of Self-control it until Christ comes again to put your body to death, and raise it to incorruptible life.

When and how you decide to train your body and subdue the flesh is your business. Sometimes God sends crosses your way and then you don’t have a choice. But you do have a choice whether or not to practice Lent. And if you don’t fast, increase prayer or almsgiving during Lent, that makes you no less a child of God. You have been saved by grace through faith, and you are full-blooded children of God in Christ who shed his blood for you on the cross, who went into the wilderness for Forty days and nights, suffering the direct temptations of Satan and persevering where Adam failed. His was the true Lenten fast, and through it, we are more than conquerors through Jesus Christ who died for our sins, is raised for our justification, and gives us new life in His Spirit.