

A well-spent Lent

by Victor Parachin and Ian Adnams

Forty ways for forty days

“It is a bad thing to be satisfied spiritually,” observed the British mystic Oswald Chambers. In earlier times, Christians, especially monks, nuns and others living in church institutions practiced various spiritual disciplines. They believed their work before God earned their ongoing salvation. As a priest, Luther never believed he did enough to earn God’s forgiveness. Once he discovered that salvation was God’s gift, by grace, through faith, his struggle for self-righteousness ended.

Luther also knew that, despite our forgiveness, we still sin. Through the Holy Spirit’s power in the Word and Sacraments, God patiently works, sanding down spiritual rough edges, refining and polishing us so that we may better reflect Him to our world. We call this process sanctification—“fix[ing] our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2).

Lent is a time of soul-searching and repentance. The forty-day observance recalls the forty days Christ spent in the desert “being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended Him” (Mark 1:13).

Scripture does not speak of Lent, and in our current culture it is minimized or even ignored. To help you focus on the forty days of Lent, here are forty daily suggestions. Some will involve action or sacrifice, others repentance, but all require a humble spirit before God as we rely on His strength.

May these simple suggestions bring new meaning to the season.

Day 1) Begin with the three “Rs”.

On the very first day of Lent, *renew* your commitment to spiritual growth; *reflect* on your spiritual life over the preceding year; finally, *respond* by asking the Holy Spirit to point out where there are deficiencies and ask for His guidance in addressing them.

Today’s Scripture: Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me (Psalm 51:10).

Day 2) Read Matthew 25:35-46.

Study this teaching of Jesus carefully. In it Jesus reminds followers that God loves everyone; that each person we encounter is to be treated with consummate dignity, respect and love. This is especially true for those who are marginalized by society: the poor, the homeless, the incarcerated.

Today’s Scripture: For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16)

Day 3) Increase your acts of mercy.

Here’s a simple prayer to guide you on this path: “Dear merciful God, give me eyes so that I never judge by appearances but see only what is beautiful in others; give me merciful ears which turn away from all gossip; give me a merciful tongue which offers words of praise and encouragement; give me merciful hands than I may reach out to the wounded with love; give me merciful feet which will walk toward those in need so that I may assist.”

Today’s Scripture: Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy (Mt. 5:7).

Day 4) Say grace.

Before eating, pause to offer thanks for what you will enjoy. Express gratitude for the many workers it took to produce your meal—the farmer, the harvester, those who delivered the product to market, the grocer, the clerk who checked you out, etc.

Today’s Scripture: Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; His love endures forever (Psalm 118:1).

Day 5) Offer arrow prayers.

These are brief one-sentence prayers offered throughout the day for different people and various matters. “Be with this retail clerk.” “Lift my colleagues’ spirits today.” “Bless my family.” “May I be a source of joy at work.” “May I handle this difficulty with calmness and kindness.”

Today’s Scripture: And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. (Eph. 6:18).

Day 6) Remember your baptism.

Through the water and the Word, the Lord made you a member of His family. Today, say a prayer of thanks to God for this gracious gift.

Today’s Scripture: But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 1:9).

Day 7) Fast.

In the past, many Christians practiced fasting during Lent. Restore this practice by going without meals one day. If that’s

too much, consider skipping just one meal. A gentle fast like this will refresh your memory that many people on the planet go hungry day after day. One fast day in Lent will serve as a reminder of the bounty you enjoy daily.

Today’s Scripture: Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God’ “ (Mt. 4:4).

Day 8) Let Scripture feed your soul.

Commit to memory a verse from God’s Word. Try Ephesians 2:8-9: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Day 9) Identify a personal weakness.

Write down one thing you’d like to change about yourself. Think about ways you could make that change during Lent. Pray for God’s help to do it.

Today’s Scripture: I can do everything through Him who gives me strength (Phil. 4:13).

Day 10) Identify a personal strength.

On the other side of the same piece of paper listing your personal weakness, write down a personal strength. Think about ways you can use that strength in your vocation and in your congregation throughout the Lenten season and beyond. It’s always a good discipline to minimize a weakness and maximize a strength.

Today’s Scripture: And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col. 3:17).

Day 11) Strive to be more like Job.

This Old Testament man had virtues which more people need to model. “I rescued the poor who cried for help and the fatherless who had none to assist him. The man who was dying blessed me; I made the widow’s heart sing...I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy. I took up the case of the stranger.” (Job 29:12-16)

Today’s Scripture: The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’ (Mt. 25:40).

Day 12) Resist temptation.

In Luke 4:1-2 it is reported that Jesus was tempted by the devil for forty days. Be like Jesus. Resist a temptation. “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

Today’s Scripture: Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you (James 4:7).

Day 13) Slow down.

Quit rushing from task to task, from place to place, from person to person. Build pauses into your day to renew and revitalize your spirit. When you engage in a task, do it more slowly and more mindfully. When you are with a person, give that individual your undivided attention.

Today’s Scripture: Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where He prayed (Mark 1:35).

Day 14) Pray for people who irritate you.

These are the ones you don't really like, the ones whose mere appearances annoy you. Pray for them to be blessed, to be happy, to be loved. You may be surprised how that kind of prayer changes you and your attitude toward the irritating people in your life.

Today's Scripture: Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you (Luke 6:28).

Day 15) Focus on 'being more' rather than 'having more.'

Evangelist Billy Graham notes: "We are slaves to our gadgets, puppets of our power, and prisoners of our security. The theme of our generation is: 'Get more, know more, and do more' instead of 'Pray more, be more, and serve more.'"

Today's Scripture: ...whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things (Phil. 4:8).

Day 16) Follow the advice of St. Paul.

In 1 Timothy 6:11-12, the apostle writes: "Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness." See God's hand at work as His Spirit works in your life through His Word and Sacraments.

Today's Scripture: But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law (Gal. 5:22-23).

Day 17) Donate to the poor.

Write a larger than normal cheque to a charitable group which serves the poor. As you write the cheque, pause to pray, asking a special blessing upon those served by that organization. If you are not able financially to do this, then do an early spring cleaning of your closet and donate clothing you haven't worn recently to charity. As you pack those give away item, pause to pray that they will be a great joy and blessing to the recipients.

Today's Scripture: But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny (Mark 12:42).

Day 18) Speak your love.

Say "I love you" to family members. Then, spread your love by saying to some outside of your family, "I love you." If you have love for them in your heart, bring that love onto your lips. Far too many people go through their entire lives not knowing they are loved by others. Do your part to let others know of your love for them.

Today's Scripture: If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother (1 John 4:20-21).

Day 19) Mend little rips and tears in your relationships.

That advice comes from Brenda Shoshanna author of *365 Ways To Give Thanks*. "Is there someone you haven't called back for a while? Or someone else with whom you never made that luncheon date, although you promised to do so? Have you been putting off a visit?" she asks. Shoshanna reminds people that "unfinished business in our relationships can become little rips and tears, making the fabric of the

relationship less sturdy with time." The solution: mend those rips and tears by putting making overdue calls, scheduling the visit, arranging the lunch.

Today's Scripture: Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble (1 Peter 3:8).

Day 20) Seek forgiveness.

Speak to someone you've hurt, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and seek their forgiveness.

Today's Scripture: For the sake of your name, O LORD, forgive my iniquity, though it is great (Psalm 25:11).

Day 21) Offer forgiveness.

Think about an individual who has hurt or offended you. Simply forgive. You don't have to tell the person you've done this, but just forgive, let it go and move on.

Today's Scripture: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Mt. 6:12)

Day 22) Remember your confirmation

At confirmation the church heard your public confession of faith which God planted at your baptism. The important lessons you learned are part of who you are today. Bring to mind your confirmation verse and thank God today for those who instructed you in the faith.

Today's Scripture Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed (1 Peter 1:13)

Day 23) Listen carefully

... especially to someone who disagrees with you. Try to listen without reacting or judging what is being said to you. As you do this you'll discover that the issue becomes much clearer and cleaner.

Today's Scripture: He who answers before listening— that is his folly and his shame (Pr 18:13).

Day 24) Be a peacemaker.

Ken Sande writes in *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* Peacemakers are people who breathe grace. They draw continually on the goodness and power of Jesus Christ, and then they bring his love, mercy, forgiveness, strength, and wisdom to the conflicts of daily life. God delights to breathe his grace through peacemakers and use them to dissipate anger, improve understanding, promote justice, and encourage repentance and reconciliation.

Today's Scripture: Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you (Col. 3:13).

Day 25) Focus on peace.

"Keep peace within yourself, then you can also bring peace to others," said Thomas A Kempis. Let your thoughts, words and actions reflect the peace of the Lord and the love He has shown you in Jesus Christ.

Today's Scripture: Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid (John 14:27).

Day 26) Confess your faith

Speak the words of the Apostles' Creed recalling its three divisions in Luther's Small Catechism: Article 1: creation; Article 2: redemption; Article 3: sanctification. Answer the question "What does this mean?"

Today's Scripture: Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses (1 Tim 6:12).

Day 27) Smile more.

And complain less!

Today's Scripture: I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want (Phil. 4:12).

Day 28) Inspire yourself.

Read an uplifting story. View a film which conveys spiritual depth. Read I Corinthians 13.

Day 29) Be an angel.

In biblical times, angels frequently appeared bringing good news. Be an angel by carrying the good news of the Gospel to a family member or friend.

Today's Scripture: I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile (Rom 1:16).

Day 30) Cultivate gentleness.

Bradford Keeney, author of *Everyday Soul*, explains: "Gentleness values the softly spoken word, the tender touch, the warm embrace, and the kind, approving gesture. When we are in the presence of holy people, it is the power of their gentleness that moves us the most...It is their consideration of others that brings forth their fullest presence."

Today's Scripture: A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger (Pr 15:1)

Day 31) Discover a new avenue for service.

Ask God to show you some new way to serve Him.

Today's Scripture: So now, go. I am sending you [Moses] to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt (Ex 3:10).

Day 32) Walk on water.

God always calls you beyond your abilities. Though it may seem that God is calling you to do the impossible, step out in faith. The walk of faith is nothing more than a call to walk on water.

Today's Scripture: But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me (2 Cor 12:9).

Day 33) Ease the suffering of another person.

Spend time with someone who is grieving or who is hospitalized or who has been wounded by life. Be fully present with compassion and love.

Today's Scripture: Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality (Rom. 12:13).

Day 34) Experience more joy.

Author Sam Keen advises: "As you go through the day, become a spy in the kingdom of joy. Look for signs that strangers you meet are enjoying themselves, and actually or vicariously join them." Joy is God's gift to share with others.

Today's Scripture: I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete (John 15:11).

Day 35) Be willing to serve.

"Have your tools ready; God will find you work," wrote Charles Kingsley.

Today's Scripture: For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it (Mt. 16:25).

Day 36) Keep your word.

It's better to be viewed as hesitant, uncertain and indecisive than to make a promise or commitment and not keep it.

Today's Scripture: Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one (Mt. 5:37).

Day 37) Spend time with God alone

In our busy lives, time alone is rare. Yet, we are never alone because God is always with us. Find some quiet time today, read Psalm 51 and be aware of God's presence

Today's Scripture: After He [Jesus] had dismissed them, He went up on a mountainside by Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone (Mt .14:23).

Day 38) Reflect on Holy Week

This week in the Christian calendar is the most solemn yet most joyous. Jesus suffered and died for our sins, and He won victory over death by rising from the dead. Be sensitive to opportunities to share the full meaning of Easter with someone today.

Today's Scripture :For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve (1 Cor. 15:3-5).

Day 39) Offset fear with faith.

When you feel worried, afraid or alone, recall and repeat these words of the psalm writer: "The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid." (Psalm 118:6)

Today's Scripture: Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD, the LORD, is the Rock eternal (Isa. 26:4).

Day 40) Look beyond Lent.

Thank God for the past 40 days and for the gift of forgiveness and new life He gave you because of Christ's sacrifice.

Today's Scripture: And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Mic. 6:8).

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