

Six Lenten Pitfalls to Avoid

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Do your mornings in Lent ever sound like this?

“I was thinking I’d make spaghetti for dinner.”

“Oh.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I can’t put parmesan cheese on the spaghetti.”

“No, you can’t.” No response. “So, does that mean we can’t have spaghetti until Lent is over?” Again no response. We’ve had this discussion before. It seems that once again we’ve fallen into a Lenten Pitfall.

Lent is a wonderful time for spiritual growth but this growth can be hindered by common mistakes. We start out with good intentions only to fizzle out by week three or set ourselves up for failure. Below are six common pitfalls I’ve encountered over the years with action plans to address these pitfalls. By knowing about them in advance, we can avoid them and have a Lent that is spiritually fruitful.

Lenten Pitfall #1 – The Cheese Conundrum

We’ve only been married for two and a half years. Each Lent, Jack has given up cheese. This is an extreme sacrifice for him. He loves cheese. No matter what I cook, he wants me to add cheese. What he has yet to comprehend is that giving up cheese is also a hardship on me as the limited meals we can both agree on become even more limited when you take cheese out of the mix. No sticking a frozen pizza in the oven or ordering one when we are too tired to cook. No mac and cheese on meatless Fridays. Hence the cheese conundrum. A good thing for him, creates a problem for me.

The spiritual writer, Gerald May, is reputed to have once fallen into the same mistake. He decided one year that he would spend more time in prayer. And when was the perfect time to add this hour of prayer? Right after he got home from work. After several days of arriving home and rushing to his den for prayer time, his wife intruded on his space and hit him on the side of the head with the fish she was preparing for dinner.

He had failed to take into account how his Lenten sacrifice would affect his family. Right after work may have been ideal for him, but it was his wife’s busiest time. He quickly got the message and changed his prayer time to one more suitable for a married man.

A common Lenten pitfall is to plan your Lenten sacrifices without taking into account how these will affect your loved ones. God put us into our families for a reason. They truly are a means to grow spiritually. They provide us with concrete expressions of love. As we learn how to love each other amid the struggles of daily life, we learn more about God’s love for us.

Action plan: Review your plans for spiritual growth and evaluate whether they are putting an undue hardship on your family.

Lenten Pitfall #2: Treating Lenten Sacrifices like New Year’s Resolutions

So you finished off the last paczki and feasted on all of your favorite food and drink in anticipation of jump starting your diet on Ash Wednesday and getting back on track with your

New Year's resolution to lose weight. What's wrong with that? Isn't God all about second chances? Here's your opportunity to give your resolutions another chance.

The problem is that resolutions tend to be all about you, whereas Lent is all about God. It's not a second chance to get those resolutions right, but a second chance to get right with God. Sure, you may forego sweets, with the benefit of losing weight, but if your reason for giving up sweets or starting an exercise program is to lose weight rather than to grow closer to God, then you are doomed to fail.

This past year I gave up sweets, but I didn't just give up my daily chocolate snack and ice cream desserts, I tried to break my addiction to sweets, a spiritual enterprise. As all twelve step groups acknowledge, the way to overcome addiction is not through our own power but through relying on God's help and intervention.

With some trepidation I took on this plan. When I used to give up sweets for Lent as a kid, for some reason I remember it as being easier. I think I had more will power back then. Now, it feels like my will power has all slipped away from years of compromise. But that's okay. Overcoming addictions isn't a matter of will power but submitting to a higher power. I think I can do that.

Sugar is such an integral part of our American culture that ridding our diet of all sugar is as impossible as getting rid of all sodium. I wasn't trying to get rid of all sugar, but I did try to break myself of my sugar habit. Even as I tried this, I found myself sneaking in sweet substitutes. I may have given up desserts, but that didn't mean I couldn't treat myself to a pop or hot chocolate, I told myself, or a glass of wine, another sugary treat. I found myself reaching for these items instead of my pieces of dark chocolate. I didn't find myself any pounds lighter come Easter, but I learned about the challenge of food addictions.

Maybe you decide to start an exercise program this Lent, but if so, do it because these bodies are temples of God and so worthy of care and respect. Do it because you want to be healthy in order to better serve God and others. Try making it a Lenten discipline as you pump weights and pray for those in need.

Action plan: Take your broken New Year resolutions, and turn them into a spiritual resolution by taking the focus off of you and putting it on God.

Lenten Pitfall #3 – Getting Discouraged and Giving Up

As I just mentioned, last year I gave up sweets for Lent. At noon on week two of Lent, I attended a luncheon meeting. Sitting in front of me in all its delicious splendor was a large chocolate chip cookie, one the mass of three regular sized cookies. I slipped it back into the box lunch, trying to avoid eye contact with the temptress as others around me munched on their cookies. Finally I slipped my hand into the box and broke off a piece. What would a small bite hurt, I told myself, then proceeded to eat half the cookie. I took the remainder home with the intent of giving it to my husband only to eat it myself later that day. So much for good intentions.

The next Monday, as I poured my morning coffee, a shamrock shaped sugar cookie replete with green frosting, stared at me from the counter where it had been enticing me since brought home from the Irish dinner concert I had attended on Saturday. Certainly it would be the perfect complement to my bitter dark brew. It wasn't really a dessert, more like a having a breakfast granola bar I rationalized as I bit in. It was delicious.

Maybe I should just admit that I have no will power and give up, I thought. Then I picked up the latest Nutrition Action (Health Letter put out by Center for Science in the Public Interest)

and read the cover article on food marketing - “What made you buy (and eat) that.” The questions asked were enlightening: “Does decision-making wear us down as we shop? Does our self-control also get worn down?” The article related studies that showed we have limited amounts of mental and emotional energy available to us. If we use that up on one situation, we have less available for another one and so give up more easily when put to the test.

No wonder I had more will power as a child when it came to giving up sweets for Lent. While childhood wasn’t exactly a blissful ride of sugar and butterflies, it didn’t hold the stress that adult life has.

I was definitely worn down. I had no energy left to resist temptation so when temptation came, I gave right in. Who can prevail when sugar coated enticements are everywhere? And so I was left where I began, with no option but to call upon God for help. I couldn’t do it on my own. I could give up, admit that I am weak, or I could ask God to help me do better. Fortunately for us, God is willing to give us another chance. His capacity for forgiveness is infinite.

Action plan: If you find you aren’t doing well with your Lenten promises, pick yourself up and try again. Discouragement is the devil’s friend. Don’t give in.

Lenten Pitfall #4 – Trying to Do Too Much!

“Tend to undertake too much, then somehow get it done.” That is one of the traits of the Meyers Briggs INFP personality.

“Yes!” I say every time I read this. “That’s me!” I always over extend myself, take on more than is reasonably possible, then get it done. I take pride in this. But then comes the next line, “Friendly but often too absorbed in what they are doing to be sociable.” That’s me as well. I’m not a social butterfly, flitting from one event to another. I get lost in what I am doing, and if anyone gets in my way, watch out.

As with all of our strengths, there is a weakness associated with it. I’m good at getting a job done, but in the process I can be considered unfriendly and anti-social. I’m not either, I’m just focused!

Another aspect of this is that I can get over-tired from fulfilling all of my self-imposed expectations, leaving me cranky and with little energy for social interactions.

Sometimes this can carry over into our observance of Lent. I may want to spend an extra hour in prayer, attend additional services as well as help out at a soup kitchen. I may be “in the zone,” as I rush from one activity to another, however, if I neglect other responsibilities or get tired and cranky because I’m overdoing it, I have to ask myself, “Who am I doing this for? Myself or God?”

Trying to do too much sets us up for failure. Better to add one thing and do it well. Or better yet, subtract something that maybe isn’t as necessary to our life as we think it is, like watching TV.

At the end of the forty days of Lent is the celebration of Holy Week. After forty days in the desert, when Jesus was weak from fasting, the devil chose to tempt him, hoping to prevail because Jesus was in a weakened state. The liturgies of Holy Week are some of the most powerful and spiritually demanding of the whole year. We relive the final hours of Jesus’ time on this earth. If we come into this week weakened rather than strengthened by our Lenten observances, we may not be able to enter fully into these celebrations.

Sometimes, the best thing to do during Lent is to let go of all preconceptions and expectations in order to let Lent be Lent—a time of spiritual growth, led by God, not you.

Do I get the Lent that I want, or the one God wants for me?

Action plan: Find one activity you can let go of in order to be open to the movement of God's spirit.

Lenten Pitfall #5 – Being a Spiritual Show-off

You know the type -- they come to work tired after volunteering for their church pantry or the numerous committees they serve on, wear their ashes like a gold medal, and are sure to tell you about the many charities they support with their donations. Jesus had choice words about such individuals.

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Mt. 6:1-4)

There's a wonderful book I read many years ago about this passage from Matthew -- *Magnificent Obsession*, by Lloyd Douglas. In the book the main character decides to literally follow what Jesus tells us to do in Matthew 6. He went about doing good works but made those he helped promise not to tell anyone. He then used these good works as “leverage” for more good deeds. Whenever someone tried to pay him back, he would tell them he had already used it up and couldn't accept recompense. It truly was an obsession to do good.

I think about this book every time I hear this passage from Matthew. When confronted with spiritual show-offs, it can be so tempting to respond in kind, telling them all you are doing for God. But in doing so you rob yourself of the benefit of what you are doing.

Are you doing your good deeds to be seen by others and receive worldly rewards or are you doing them for God? If for God, then that is reward enough.

Action plan: Refrain from comparing yourself to others or allowing Lent to become a competition. Do your good deeds in secret.

Lenten Pitfall #6 – Failing to Celebrate the Easter Season

There are forty days of Lent, fifty days in the Easter Season. That means we are meant to spend more time rejoicing than we spend repenting!

We spend time focusing on Lent, making sacrifices, striving to grow in our faith, then Easter comes and we are done. If only we spent as much time celebrating Easter as we spend preparing for Easter.

When Lent is over, do you continue the spiritual growth you achieved? Or do you just go back to life as usual?

Action plan: This year plan Easter celebrations for throughout the Easter season. Put as much effort into this as you put into Lent!

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