



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Preparing for Joy
(*Lent*, pp. 11-17)

Suggested Articles:

📖 Adding In, Not Giving Up
(*Lent*, pp. 87-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2013 The Center for Christian Ethics

Preparing for Joy

Lent is an invitation to honesty and clarity. It is our preparation for joy because it is the concentrated and disciplined time when we together work to root out the blindness and deception that prevent us from receiving each other as gracious gifts from God.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 15:11-32

Meditation¹

Let us begin the [Lenten] Fast with joy. Let us give ourselves to spiritual efforts. Let us cleanse our souls. Let us cleanse our flesh. Let us fast from passions as we fast from foods, taking pleasure in the good works of the Spirit and accomplishing them in love that we all may be made worthy to see the passion of Christ our God and His Holy Pascha, rejoicing with spiritual joy.

Reflection

If this emphasis on Lenten joy strikes us as surprising, or even perverse, it may be because we think of penitence as giving up things and activities we otherwise love. How can we enjoy that?

To answer, Norman Wirzba says, let's get "clear about our most basic commitments and attachments and then determine if they have their impulse in a clean heart. The time of Lent is not about saying 'No' to anything made or provided by God. It cannot be, because everything God has made is good and beautiful, a gift and blessing that God has provided as the expression of his love. If there is a 'No' that has to be said, it will be a 'No' directed to the distorting and degrading ways we have developed in appropriating these gifts," he observes. "We do not appreciate how in mishandling the gifts of God we bring ruin to ourselves and to the world *while we are in the midst of having a good time.*"

Think of the Christian life as wearing a new pair of glasses that help us see everything from Christ's point of view (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:16 ff.). But, they keep getting "dirty or scratched and we gradually lose the ability to see things as the gifts of God that they really are. Instead we see them in terms of what they can do for us," Wirzba notes. It's difficult to notice how distorted our vision is becoming, because (as you recall) we are looking at everything, including ourselves, through now-dirty glasses! "Simply by living in a consumerist culture like our own we are daily taught to see everything as a means to the satisfaction of whatever end we choose. We are not, for the most part, mean-spirited about this. We are simply performing a script that is written out for us in thousands of media and marketing messages."

This is where the season of Lent comes in.

- ▶ By *starting with self-examination and repentance*, Lent helps us "appreciate how much our vision and handling of the world is a distortion and degradation" and "learn to see each other rightly as gifts of God's love." We can even enjoy cleaning our glasses, for we anticipate seeing clearly once again.
- ▶ *Corporate embodied practices like fasting* train us to relate to the world properly. Because eating is "the daily means through which we relate to the created world, communities of humanity, and ultimately to God," it is thus "a paradigmatic act that expresses...who we think we are and how we fit into the world," Wirzba notes. Fasting helps us enjoy food properly.



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2013 The Center for Christian Ethics

- ▶ Lenten practices *teach us humility*, which is not a form of self-loathing, but a true perspective on ourselves that rejects arrogance. Since humility is “the honest admission of personal life as necessarily enfolded within and dependent on the lives of others and the gifts of God,” Wirzba explains, it “makes possible the true enjoyment of others because we now perceive and receive them properly: namely, as gifts and blessings meant to be cared for, celebrated, and shared.”
- ▶ These practices *draw us into communion with others*. Lent is difficult for us because we are trying to “experience real togetherness simply by relating to others always on *our* terms. But this cannot work.... Communion is built upon love, and love is always an hospitable act that welcomes, nurtures, and sets others free to be themselves. To love another is to give oneself and one’s abilities and gifts to them. Only then can our presence in the world be a source of joy to those we meet.”

Study Questions

1. Jesus’ story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) is often read during Lent. How does it frame our view of the season?
2. Why, for Norman Wirzba, is fasting so important? What is the “improper eating” that it calls attention to and corrects?
3. “What are you *adding in* for Lent this year?” Elizabeth Sands Wise asks. Discuss how the four answers she canvases — “adding in practices that free us from false cares, setting time aside for reading, cultivating humility, praying through ancient texts alone or in a community, or digging into Scripture to encounter Christ anew” — prepare us for Lenten joy.
4. How does Robert Robinson’s famous hymn “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” express Lenten joy?

Departing Hymn: “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” (vv. 1 and 3)

Come, thou Fount of every blessing,
tune my heart to sing thy grace;
streams of mercy, never ceasing,
call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount I’m fixed upon it
mount of God’s redeeming love.

Oh, to grace how great a debtor
daily I’m constrained to be!
Let thy goodness, like a fetter,
bind my wandering heart to thee:
prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
prone to leave the God I love;
here’s my heart, O take and seal it;
seal it for thy courts above.

Robert Robinson (1758), alt.
Tune: NETTLETON

† This is from the Orthodox Church’s Vespers Liturgy for Forgiveness Sunday, which is the Sunday before Lent. Thomas Hopko, *The Lenten Spring: Readings for Great Lent* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1983), 12.

Preparing for Joy

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Meditation | Meditation |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 1 and 2 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To focus on the penitential season of Lent as a time of joy because it trains us to receive each other as gracious gifts from God.
2. To consider how the parable of the Prodigal Son frames our understanding of Lent.
3. To discuss how specific Lenten practices – such as self-examination, repentance, and fasting – teach true humility and undergird communion with others.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Lent (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” locate the familiar tune NETTLETON in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Comment

“People think it’s strange to like Lent,” Sarah Parsons admits, for “actually *liking* Lent seems to verge on masochism. It sounds as if one enjoys scrutinizing the past, dragging out every misdeed, and wallowing in guilt for six weeks.” Yet she captures the homecoming joy of this season when she notes, “Lent...is a time of introspection, true, but its ultimate purpose lies beyond penitence. In essence Lent serves as our annual invitation to come closer to God. It provides a time to look at our lives and ourselves, not so we may criticize ourselves more harshly but so we can identify the obstructions that keep us from God. What keeps us from feeling the presence of the divine in our every day? How do we hide from God, and why? Lent gives us a chance to look at such obstructions and to move them gently away so that we can come closer to the Love that gives us life, the Love whose triumph we will celebrate on Easter morning.” (Sarah Parsons, *A Clearing Season: Reflections for Lent* [Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2005], 8)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to help members find joy in the Lenten season of penitence.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 15:11-32 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study begins our reflection on the season of Lent, a time of penitence in preparation for Easter and Pentecost. Norman Wirzba describes it as a season of joy because the point of Lenten practices is not denying ourselves God’s good gifts, but becoming more aware of and rejecting those attitudes and desires that cause us

to misuse one another and creation. (These distorted attitudes and desires are called “passions” in the Orthodox tradition.) We can even enjoy the cleansing process of the self because we know it is preparing us for the greater joy of loving communion with God and others.

Study Questions

1. The story of the Prodigal Son, which is a lection for the fourth Sunday of Lent during year C, frames Norman Wirzba’s understanding of the joy of the Lenten season. Like the prodigal, we often tread “a path of quick pleasure but long-term ruin and misery.” We do not intentionally choose the dire results, but “the effect of so many of our choices and practices – all of them expected and deemed by our culture to be normal – put us precisely where as Christians we should not be. To repent we need to be confronted with the blindness and the foolishness of our ways. The confrontation can be painful because few of us like to come face to face with the arrogance, anxiety, and pettiness that animate our hearts.” Perhaps, like the prodigal distrusted his father, we have even doubted God’s love and taken life into our own hands. Lent is a time of joy because we know that by rejecting the attitudes and resisting the desires that distort our love for God, we are preparing for God’s loving embrace and communion with one another that is beyond all we can imagine.
2. Wirzba analyzes fasting as a paradigm Lenten practice because eating is so central to our creaturely lives and clearly expresses how we relate to one another and the creation as God’s gifts. In fasting we do not reject God’s good gift of food, but our distorted use of food. “Improper eating,” he writes, “assumes food is ours for the taking. It is eating that has regard primarily for the pleasures of one’s own belly but not for the bellies of others. It is eating that dishonors God because it degrades the sources of food – land, water, plants, animals – and abuses the means – farm workers, cooks, waiters, clean-up crews – that put food on our tables. It is eating that forgets food is a blessing to be shared.” Fasting expresses remorse for our improper ways, and refocuses our attention on proper reception of the gift of food. The practice illustrates “cleaning the glasses to see rightly.” (We will learn more about the practice of fasting in the third study guide in this series, “Responsive Fasting.”)
3. Create four small groups to discuss the activities Elizabeth Sands Wise identifies in her review of Lenten resources, *Adding In, Not Giving Up*. The first one, based on Paula Huston’s *Simplifying the Soul*, adopts actions that thoughtfully refocus our relationships to the places we live, the marketplace, our bodies, our minds, our schedules, other people, prayer, and God. Emilie Griffin’s *Small Surrenders* recommends setting aside time for spiritual reading. John Indermark’s *Gospelled Lives* directs us to reflect on Gospel passages, and Frederica Mathewes-Green’s *First Fruits of Prayer* invites us to pray along with ancient Christian texts.

How can each activity provoke self-examination and repentance, lead to humility, and engender communion with others and God? Sands Wise does not recommend trying all of them at once, but focusing on just one each Lenten season. Members might discuss whether they, individually or as a group, would adopt one of these activities for Lent.
4. “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” was written for Whitsunday (a term used in Great Britain for Pentecost Sunday). Most hymnals publish the first three verses of Robinson’s text; here we will study verses one and three from the perspective of Lenten repentance and joy. The third verse reminds us of the story of the Prodigal Son: we admit “prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, / prone to leave the God I love” even *after* we have acknowledged “God’s redeeming love” (in verse one). Thus, we are in debt to grace “daily” as God draws us back to himself. The hymn text is brutally honest about our failings, yet totally assured of God’s “streams of mercy, never ceasing.” As a result, we can learn now to sing the joyful “songs of loudest praise” of God that will culminate in “thy courts above.”

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.