

SUNDAY BEFORE LENT (8-C 2025)

In our second reading today, Saint Paul says, **“Be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord, your labor is not in vain.”**

Then in our Holy Gospel, Jesus tells us not to worry about our neighbors’ faults and imperfections, to not be concerned about **“the splinter in our brother’s eye.”** He says instead, **“Remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter in your brother’s eye.”**

This coming Wednesday, we will begin the Season of Lent, and these two passages can serve as inspirations for us. These passages can serve to nudge us to pick up the pace a bit and to put our spiritual lives front and center amidst all the other cares in our daily lives.

Just like we service our cars regularly or go to the doctor for an annual physical, so too, it makes sense that we do a spiritual checkup every year to make sure that our relationship with God is in order and to work on overcoming any bad habits that may have developed, and that’s where Lent comes in.

During Lent we focus more intently on what’s most important in life, namely, the state of our souls. Saint Paul says that we should **“be firm and steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord,”** but that’s not easy. We often get sidetracked. Instead of focusing on how we ourselves are doing with God, we can start comparing ourselves to others and then decide we are doing OK and so, we end up doing nothing about our own faults. That’s why Jesus said, **“Remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter in your brother’s eye.”** That’s where Lent comes in. It helps us do just that.

Now Lent shouldn’t be just like any other time in the year. Lent should be a time where we deliberately work to change our ordinary routines and get ourselves into shape spiritually. Lent should be a time of spiritual exercise. We should feel Lent. Just as you feel sore after hard exercise, so too, you will feel the results of your Lenten exercises. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are the traditional Lenten exercises.

And why do we do these things? We do them to ready ourselves for Easter which is the greatest of all solemnities and feasts. Easter is the day on which our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ rose from the dead and vanquished sin and Satan and death.

So, let’s take a closer look at these traditional Lenten exercises.

The first is prayer. Now prayer is talking to God, and prayer is essential for our spiritual lives. Even our Lord felt the need to pray to His Father, and He did so often (Mk 6:46, Mk 14:32, Lk 23:34, etc.). Without prayer, our love of God will grow cold. So cold in fact that we might not even think about God at all and ultimately won’t even care if He exists. An individual who stops praying becomes spiritually blind, loses his faith, and finally, his soul as well.

So, daily prayer is essential to our spiritual life. If you haven't been praying on a daily basis, Lent is the time to begin again. Resolve to set aside ten or fifteen minutes or even a half hour each day for prayer. If you have been praying daily, resolve to spend a bit more time at it. Perhaps you might initiate a family Rosary after dinner before everyone runs off.

An especially good practice is daily Mass. Many of you are retired and others have shifts which would let you get to daily Mass at least some of the time during Lent.

Another excellent form of prayer is a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. Come to Church and spend some time with our Lord, and remember that we have adoration at Saint Luke on Thursdays and at Saint Patrick's on Fridays. Both begin at 5:30 p.m.

Stations of the Cross and Benediction is another very traditional and appropriate Lenten prayer. We are having Stations each Wednesday at Saint Patrick's (followed by soup supper) and on Friday at Saint Luke's.

To help you pray more, I would encourage you to take home a copy of the Word Among Us. It has prayers and readings in it for each day during Lent.

The second traditional exercise is fasting, and fasting is hard work. Nobody likes being hungry. And yet Jesus assumes that we fast from time to time. He Himself gave us an example when he went into the desert and fasted (Lk 4:1-2). We see that the apostles also fasted (Acts 13:2-3). Indeed, fasting and abstinence have always been a part of the Church and of a Christian's life. In fact, the forty days of Lent were derived from Christ's fast of forty days.

Even before Christ, the Israelites fasted (Ps 35:13), and so did the other ancient peoples. For example, when Jonah announced that Nineveh would be destroyed, the king proclaimed a fast and sat in the ashes (Jonah 3).

Fasting is a powerful prayer. It's one way of doing penance for our sins. Fasting also helps us resist the temptations that come from time to time. Just as we exercise our bodies, so too, we need to exercise our souls. You might call fasting spiritual exercise. By denying ourselves what is permitted, we grow stronger so that we can resist what is not.

Fasting also purifies us so that we can think clearly. It's interesting that both Jesus and the apostles fasted before they made major decisions. Fasting clears out a lot of the useless and unnecessary things which tend to fill our lives. Finally, fasting is the prayer by which demons are driven out. It should be a regular part of our spiritual exercises.

Now I should point out that fasting is a form of self-denial, that is, a form of penance. It may be that you are not able to fast. However, I would encourage you to deny yourself in some way during Lent. This might be by giving up something you enjoy, like your favorite TV program or Videos or candy or beer or whatever. It could also be by doing something extra such as visiting the sick or those in nursing homes or studying your faith or by reading a chapter of the Bible each day in Lent.

Here again, I would like to encourage you to join one of our Parish Ark small groups; try it out for Lent. Their meeting times and places are all listed in the bulletin and on our website.

The third Lenten exercise is almsgiving, and almsgiving means giving money (or by extension, goods and services) to the poor or the needy. Doing so is an expression of our love of neighbor. I should point out here that we are talking about our own money and not the government's, that is, what we have made and what we possess ourselves.

Notice that giving alms is not just an option but a duty for the Christian. Jesus told us, "When you give alms ... (Mt 6:2)." He didn't say if you give alms, or perhaps as an afterthought, if it occurs to you to give something to the poor ... No, He said WHEN YOU GIVE. Jesus expects us to give to those who are in need, who are less fortunate than ourselves, and there are many examples of this in the Holy Bible.

God is the author of all things. All that we have and possess has come from Him, and what He has entrusted to us, He expects will be used wisely (Mt 25:14-30) and generously (Lk 16:19-31 & Lk 10:25-37). In fact, Jesus even counsels that if we wish to become perfect, we should sell all we have and give to the poor and then come and follow Him (Mt 19:16-22).

An attachment to riches and the things of this world divides us from God. Almsgiving on the other hand, helps us overcome our attachment to the things of this world. It frees us so that we have more room for God in our hearts, and it helps us develop a trust in God, a dependence on Him, where we come to see that all we have has come from Him anyhow.

One way you could give Alms this Lent is to use the Rice Bowl sponsored by Catholic Charities. These are at the Church entrances. Put your spare change from the day in them, and by the end of Lent, you will have a nice amount to give to those in need. Obviously, you could also give to any charity which aids the poor and those in need.

This Lent as we work to get ready for Easter, I hope we can do so with a sense of having been purified by almsgiving, fasting and prayer. Resolve to do something hard this Lent so that you can feel what you're doing.

As we look forward to the great feast of Easter, let us not forget the importance and indeed, the necessity of these things in our lives. Jesus expects this of us (Mt 6:1-18), and we know that through them, we will grow in holiness. Amen.