

Sermon

Dan Neary

Looking to Lent

I grew up in the suburbs of an *eastern* city: Chicago. For the first two decades of my life, I grew up on the edge of Northwest Indiana's steel country... the southeast corner of Chicagoland. I could see smokestacks from the steel mills from my driveway. I could drive less than 10 miles north to the Lake Michigan shore to see the Chicago skyline, or drive 45 minutes northwest to be in downtown Chicago (or 15 minutes in the opposite direction and be in the middle of Orville Redenbacher's popcorn fields).



Chicago is an *eastern* city. The third decade of my life was spent in Minneapolis, a *western* city. It is said of the Twin Cities that Minneapolis is the first of the western cities, and St. Paul is the last of the eastern cities. Having lived in both eastern cities (Chicago and Boston), and now being quite at home in a western city (Seattle), I think that is a good assessment. There is a different feel about a western city... different energies that one can distinguish between western cities and eastern cities.

Eastern cities, for one distinguishing characteristic, are Catholic cities. Populated with European immigrants in their founding years, eastern cities were established not only as centers of commerce and government, but of religion... and the Roman Catholic religion was dominant in eastern cities.

500 yards from my front door, even on the edge of the city, was the Seven Dolors Shrine, 160 acres run by brown-robe-wearing Franciscan Friars (monks), dedicated to the seven *sorrows* of Mary (dolor is a Latin word for sorrow). It included grottos, outdoor altars, and an elaborate circular pathway with the 14 stations of the Way of the Cross that was a destination for spiritual pilgrims. I had a lot of childhood friends who attended mass in the beautiful chapel near the entrance of the shrine, faithful members of the Our Lady of Sorrows parish of the diocese of Gary, Indiana.

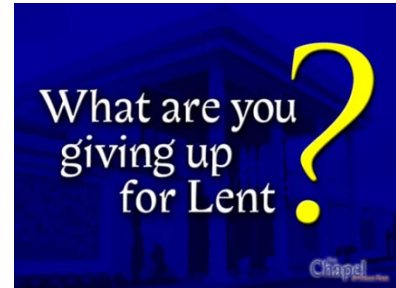
It was all very *mysterious* to me. In spite of my Irish name (Danny O'Neary), and my Irish Catholic ancestry, I was not raised as a Roman Catholic. There are lots of Catholic Nearys, including an Archbishop Michael Neary of Ireland's largest Archdiocese. But all that ended for us Neary's with my grandfather Paul Neary. Apparently he got himself excommunicated for marrying my grandmother, Margaret, a Methodist. As Paul Neary would say, "I didn't really give a _____, all those _____ _____, can stick it in their _____!" I don't think by Grandpa Neary was really ever much of a church-going type.

The whole *Catholic thing* would get even more mysterious to me around this time of the year when on a Wednesday friends and teachers would show up at school with a smudge of ashes on their forehead. They had started early in the morning with an Ash Wednesday mass, and they now moved through their day with this temporary badge of piety on their face.

The common question was:

“What are you giving up for Lent?”

- Candy, Chocolate
- TV
- Meat
- Cussing



Have you ever given anything up for Lent? What?

My friend Carl’s parents were immigrants from Eastern Europe... some sort of Slovaks, I think. I think Carl’s mom walked to Shrine every day for mass. I’m pretty sure they were hard core about Lent. Fish on every Friday, but no red meat, at all, during Lent. I think they even fasted on Ash Wednesday and the Fridays of Lent.

I tried a few times as a kid, just so that I could be part of the group... but never got very far with it. I didn’t make any sense to me; I never understood the meaning.

Later on I came to understand that Lent is the 40 days (less the Sundays) that precede Easter. The 40 days of “fasting” that comprise Lent commemorate the 40 day fast that preceded the ministry of Jesus.

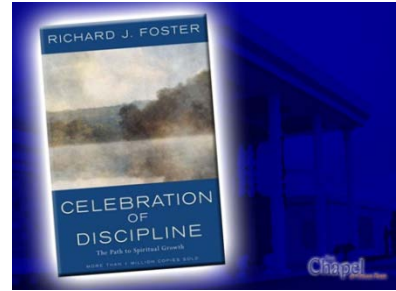
Throughout Church history, Lent has been devoted to focusing on Jesus through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. It has come to be understood as a time of mortification... a time of denying the flesh... proving that we are in control of our desires and not ruled by our stomachs. It is, historically, a time of solemn austerity (prayer, fasting, and almsgiving)... not much fun at all.

So... popular culture has responded to the austerity of Lent with the indulgence of Fat Tuesday (or Mardi Gras in French). Eat, drink, and be merry... for tomorrow we will be “holy.”

As I put together our church calendar, I did not program in anything special for Fat Tuesday... but we are intending to give some attention to these 40 days that precede Easter. I hope that we will all apply ourselves to a special focus on Jesus in these days that lead through His suffering and to the celebration of His glorious Resurrection.



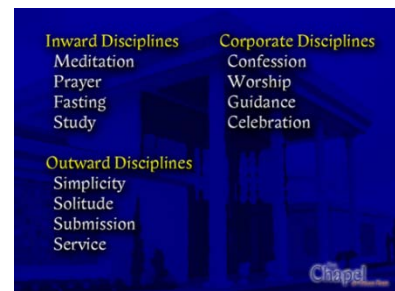
In preparation for this talk, and the days that follow, I've been rereading Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*. I have my copy from one of the first classes I took at North Central Bible College as a brand new Christian almost 25 years ago. It was required reading for a class that everyone had to take called "Devotional Life." I had no idea what the class was about when I signed up; it was just one of those 100-level classes required of everyone that I had to get out of the way. I quickly found out that it was a class intent on teaching me how to be a spiritual Christian. In my case it didn't really work, at least not immediately, but it was really helpful.



If you haven't read *Celebration of Discipline*, you ought to. And if you haven't looked at it in a long time, you ought to pick it up again. In the foreword, D. Elton Trueblood predicted that it might become a Christian classic... and now thirty years after it was first published, it has proven to be just that.

Foster expands the list of "disciplines" to twelve in three categories:

- Inward Disciplines
 - Meditation
 - Prayer
 - Fasting
 - Study
- Outward Disciplines
 - Simplicity
 - Solitude
 - Submission
 - Service
- Corporate Disciplines
 - Confession
 - Worship
 - Guidance
 - Celebration

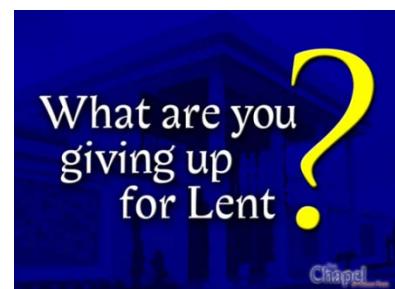


Before we look any more deeply into these "disciplines," and a few others, let's go to that question:

"What are you going to give up for Lent?"

Speaking as your pastor this morning, I really *couldn't care less* what you give up for Lent... I really don't care *if* you give up anything for Lent.

I think the better questions are:



“What are you going to get out of Lent?”

“What are you going to pursue for Lent?” Or maybe the best question is:

“Who are you going to pursue for Lent?”

In Foster’s opening pages, he puts it this way:

“Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.

The classical Disciplines of the spiritual life call us to move beyond the surface living into the depths. They invite us to explore the inner caverns of the spiritual realm. They urge us to be the answer to a hollow world.”

The title of his first chapter sums it up nicely:

“The Spiritual Disciplines: Door to Liberation.”

We intend these 40 days of Lent, and these next six Sundays that lead up to Easter, to be liberating... we want giant, liberal, extravagant portions of Jesus.

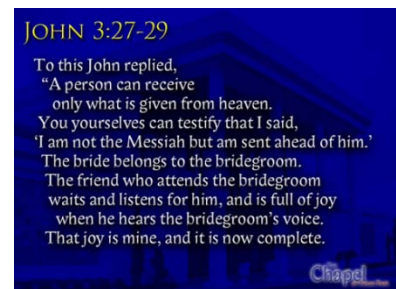
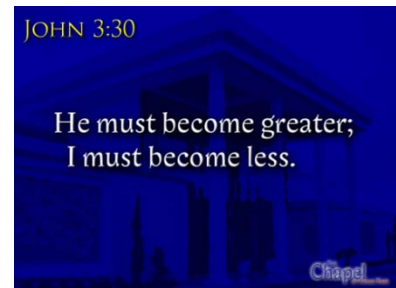
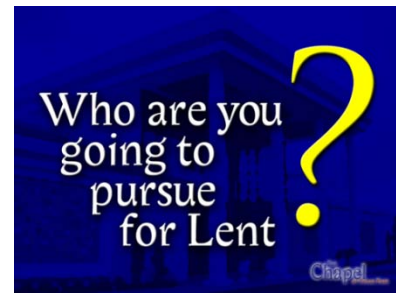
Just as John the Baptist anticipated the ministry of Jesus, we look down the road of these 40 days, seeing the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus in the not-so-distant future, and we join John in saying that Jesus must increase.

He must become greater; I must become less.

In John’s case, there were those who were concerned that Jesus, this one whom John himself had baptized, was gaining more fame and popularity than John himself. But John explained that he was doing all that he was called to do, all that he could do.

²⁷To this John replied, “A person can receive only what is given from heaven. ²⁸You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.’ ²⁹The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.¹

¹ *The Holy Bible: Today’s New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Jn 3:27-29.



In this case, John didn't have to perform some mortification ritual to "make himself less." He was merely acknowledging that while John was doing all was called and able to do, Jesus was doing all that He could... and in the comparison, John was becoming less and less.

Christians ought to find themselves in the same circumstance. As we do what we can in this life of faith, Jesus should be magnified, Jesus should become larger and larger and we become less and less in the comparison. The point isn't that we are mortifying ourselves, making ourselves small and weak; the point is that in our life of faith, Jesus becomes larger and larger.

Spiritual disciplines help us make Jesus large in our lives.

We don't, through these disciplines, earn God's favor, nor force God to do something in us or for us.

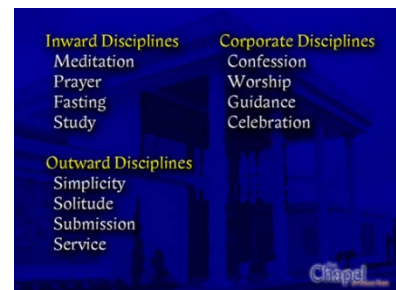
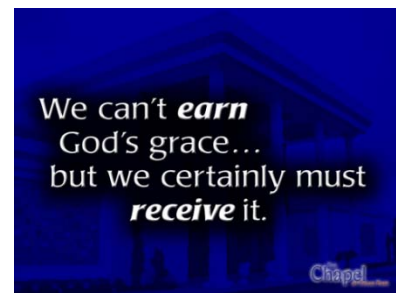
We can't **earn** God's grace...
but we certainly must **receive** it.

Spiritual disciplines help us to receive God's grace,
making Him large in our lives.

It is so very easy to think that we are into these spiritual disciplines to impress... to impress God, or others, or even ourselves. But it simply doesn't work that way. The disciplines can't **earn** us anything, but they certainly can put us in a position to **receive** much!

So...

- In **meditation** we listen for God's voice
- In **prayer** we commit our cares and concerns to Him
- In **fasting** we declare that God is most essential for our substance
- In **study** we seek to understand the Truth of His Word
- In **simplicity** we liberate ourselves from our possessions, seeking God's Kingdom first
- In **solitude** we seek fulfillment from an inner life with God
- In **submission** we lay down the burden of needing to get our own way, following Jesus in considering others above ourselves
- In **service** pursuing *Christ likeness* through humility
- In **confession** receiving the forgiveness purchased by Jesus and his suffering on the Cross
- In **worship** responding to all the God has done for us
- In **guidance** following leaders that God places in our path for our good
- In **celebration** giving thanks to God through joyous festivity



So... what will we do with all this in these days that lie ahead. So what? Will we, **can** we, **should** we use these 40 days of Lent?

There are all sorts of ways that we could go with this, allow me, in these closing minutes to suggest a few.

Seven days a week

There is something to the idea of not counting Sundays in the 40 days of Lent. By tradition, each of these Sundays serves as a sort of mini-Easter, days of celebration that interrupt the days of discipline.

For most of us, we have Sundays pretty well taken care of when it comes to spiritual disciplines. Our worship services are intentionally constructed to lead us in many of the disciplines (prayer, meditation, study, guidance, worship, celebration, etc.).

A special focus on spiritual disciplines provides us with an opportunity to strengthen our walk with God Monday-Saturday.

Saying "yes" and "no"

While much of the culture may focus on "saying no" to various indulgences during Lent, I'm encouraging us to be sure that we understand that saying "yes" to God is a much higher goal.

Remember what I said earlier:

We can't **earn** God's grace... but we certainly must **receive** it.

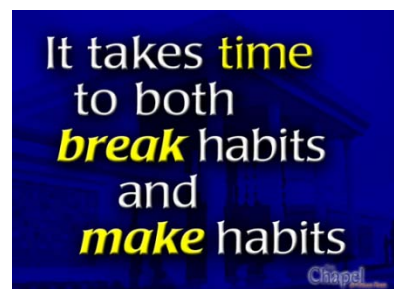
Saying "no," alone, may not get you very far; we have to say "yes."

Saying "yes," alone, may not get you very far either. This walk of faith is both a "yes" and "no" proposition. We say "no" in order to make room to say "yes" to all God has for us.

Habits

These 40 days of Lent are just about the right time to both **make** habits and **break** habits. It takes time to both break habits and make habits.

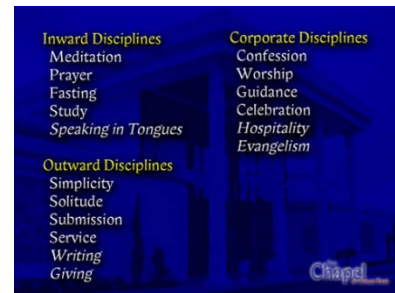
This is true about all sorts of habits; I'm finding it to be true with exercise.



If we want to establish these disciplines as a habit, we ought to be prepared for a bit of struggle to last about the length of the season.

Tools for the task

Looking at the list, both on the screen and printed in the bulletin, you'll see that I added a few more. I think that if we took a few minutes together this morning, we could probably think of several more.



As an inward discipline, I've added speaking in tongues. We're going to have opportunity to explore this more in a series we're putting together after Easter in the weeks leading to Pentecost. For now, I simply added it to the list of inward disciplines, following the clear teaching of Scripture (1 Corinthians 14:4) that speaking in tongues edifies the Believer.

⁴Those who speak in a tongue edify themselves, but those who prophesy edify the church. ⁵I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. Those who prophesy are greater than those who speak in tongues, unless they interpret, so that the church may be edified.²

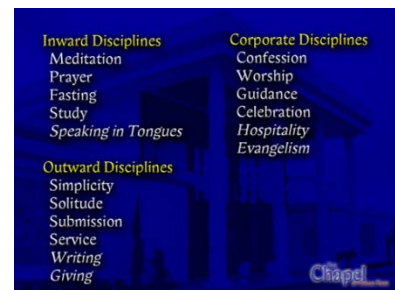
To the **outward disciplines** I added **writing** and **giving**. We've been talking about this for a few weeks, and now we'll get underway with this writing project this week, starting Wednesday. Several people are queued up to write, but there is still room to jump in.



Everyone is encouraged to join in the project by leaving comments on the blog entries.

To the **corporate disciplines** I added **hospitality** and **evangelism**. We've been talking about this as well.

These Sunday's leading up to Easter, when we are focusing on the person, pattern and characteristics of Jesus, present an excellent opportunity to invite people to Church.



I'm asking everyone to join us in this discipline. Most people only come to church when invited... let's be **inviters**.

Jump in. Here's a good list, maybe you are thinking of others.

² *The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). 1 Co 14:4-5.

Pick a few... or maybe try them all. I printed the list there in the bulletin thinking that you might just put a mark next to some, or circle a few.

Could we all underline evangelism, making that one of the disciplines we'll pursue in these coming days and weeks?

What about the others? This is a call to go deeper with God. If Sunday morning is the extent of your spiritual life; this is a call to go deeper.

It could be that many of us have developed a number of these disciplines, but there are others that remain underdeveloped; this is a call to go deeper.

And there are those who discovered the joy of these disciplines years ago, and your depth of devotion is truly remarkable; I know that there are many who have developed these disciplines in ways that I have not yet attained. Even for you, this is a call to go deeper.

Pray for guidance, and pray for help.

- Desire
- Discovery
- Disciplined yes and no

