

Lent won't save you

Perhaps no one really believes giving up coffee or cookies forgives their sins. But do we see a Lenten discipline as an act of will?

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March 7, 2019



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Yesterday I issued my usual pre-Lent reminder: no matter how hard you fail or how well you succeed in keeping your Lenten discipline the failing or the succeeding will not save you. It's a regular warning I issue; mostly because it fits with the pithiness of social media.

But then came the question, "Don't people already know that?"

This came in various forms but essentially the questions boiled down to the idea that no one really believes their Lenten discipline will make them right with their Lord

and Savior.

And in the most literal sense this is true. If the Reformation has accomplished anything it is that the message of God's free and abundant grace has been spread far and wide. Of course, I still have many people come to me all the time and say, "Isn't Christianity really just about being a good person?" But we can ignore that for the larger point. I do concede that in a most literal fashion no one probably believes giving up chocolate forgives their sins.

Except life is not just literal. Even the word *literal* doesn't just mean "literal" anymore. Frankly, ever since Adam and Eve thought listening to the serpent was good idea, human beings are convinced deep in our very selves that there is some way to God that includes our actions. Perhaps people are not convinced that giving up Facebook for 40 days will wash them of their sins, but most of us harbor the deep conviction that if we piece together enough such actions then we will become essentially good religious people.

So perhaps no one believes that giving up coffee for Lent will save them. But I am certain that many people enter into Lent believing that this time their Lenten discipline will kick start some spiritual change.

Or maybe I'm only certain because that is how it works for me. Maybe for most their Lenten discipline is just something done by sheer automatic programming at this point. Something to do because it has always been done. If that is you, then you will receive no judgment from me. "That's the way we've always done it" is not nearly as bad a reason as we sometimes think.

But I know for myself that I began nearly every Lent in college thinking that I would give up smoking and somehow, over the course of those forty days, I would be able to say those blessed words "I don't smoke." I never managed it, and in fact over the course of less than a week I found all sorts of ways to cheat and make exceptions until the fast was meaningless.

The one time I did actually manage to complete some form of Lenten discipline, I remember that particular attempt as some great and glorious thing. Not because it brought me closer to God, but because I did it under my own power.

This was all, of course, an attempt to manufacture my own reality. If I could just complete that Lenten discipline, then I could make myself into the person I should

be. That is another thing humans are fairly good at, manufacturing their own reality. We have even developed increasingly powerful tools to help us with this, Facebook and Twitter among them.

My regular Lenten reminder serves as a response to myself. To answer the question that originally started all this: yes, most people do know, in their heads, that their Lenten discipline will not save them.

And at the same time I still come to Lent convinced that I can piece it all together this time. So perhaps I don't quite know it as well as it may seem.

Lent is a time for unveiling. When Jesus repeats "your father who sees in secret" in our Gospel lesson for Ash Wednesday what he is really getting at is the uselessness of all the ways we try to hide ourselves. Your Father sees in secret, don't pretend that your attempts to manufacture your reality, whether it be through Instagram or the right Lenten discipline, count for anything. None of those things will save you.

Only Jesus and the cross will.

Originally posted at [The Fire Escape](#)