

Ash Wednesday
February 9, 2005
Psalm 51:16-17

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

What Does God Want from Me This Lenten Season?

*You do not delight in sacrifice. Or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
The sacrifices that please God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise.*

Fellow Christians,

Here we are once again at the beginning of another Lenten season. What are we to make of Lent? What are we to do with it? That can be a challenging question to answer, given the variety of traditions and instructions for Lent. Some Christians, not just Roman Catholics, have gone to church this Ash Wednesday to have ashes applied to their foreheads. Some Christians, especially Roman Catholics, say that this day, Ash Wednesday, is a day of fasting and abstinence, a day on which no meat is to be eaten. Many Christians, not just Roman Catholics, starting today, will give something up for Lent, a certain kind of food, perhaps, or a certain type of activity.

What does the Bible say? The Bible is the only infallible guide for our lives as Christians, but the Bible doesn't mention Lent. Obviously, then, the Bible doesn't speak of giving anything up for Lent. There is no New Testament passage that commands fasting or abstaining from certain foods, either. There are examples of fasting and abstinence, but no commands to fast or abstain. Our catechism, in the section on the Lord's Supper, concedes that "fasting and other outward preparations may serve a good purpose," but there is no command. The observance of this forty day season of Lent—measured from today through the Saturday before Easter, not counting the Sundays—and the imposition of ashes are like fasting: they may serve a good purpose. In Christian liberty we are free to follow these customs or not to follow them.

But that brings us back to our original question: What are we to do with Lent? We've chosen to observe this penitential season that leads

up to Easter and the celebration of our Lord's resurrection. What does God want from us this Lenten season? I think we can only say that God wants from us during Lent what he wants from us at every other time of the year. Here in Psalm 51, King David is the conduit God uses to tell us about the sacrifices that please God. Let's look at these verses a little more carefully.

David says to the LORD here, "*You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it.*" Is that right? God doesn't delight in sacrifice? Why, during the remaining Wednesdays of this Lenten season we're going to be looking at passages from Leviticus and Exodus in which God through Moses laid down in very clear and precise fashion the sacrifices he wanted his Old Testament people to offer to him: the burnt offering, the sin offering, and the fellowship offering, for example. How can David say that God doesn't delight in sacrifices when God himself ordained certain sacrifices?

Actually, in the last verse of this very psalm, David mentions sacrifices again. He refers to "*righteous sacrifices*" and "*whole burnt offerings to delight (God).*" So there are sacrifices that God delights in, but some in which he finds no delight. Which are the ones he detests? You have only to listen to the prophets of the Old Testament. Through the prophet Jeremiah, the LORD said, "**Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat yourselves! For when I brought your forefathers out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people.**" (Jer. 7:22-23) Do you see here what God detests? He detests a sacrifice that is merely an outward performance, unaccompanied by true repentance and a desire to do God's will. If sacrifices are just an exercise, just an elaborate process of going through the motions, God takes no delight in them.

The classic example of that would be King Saul, the first king of Israel. Through the prophet Samuel, the LORD gave Saul orders to lead the army of Israel against their enemies the Amalekites. And God said that Saul was to totally destroy the Amalekites, the people, as well as anything that belonged to them. Well, the army of Israel went out and won a great victory over the Amalekites that day, but when Samuel arrived on the scene of the victory, he could hear the bleating of sheep and the lowing of cattle. He asked Saul for an explanation of this defiance of God's command. Saul responded, "**The soldiers took**

sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the LORD your God at Gilgal.” That’s when Samuel famously replied, **“Does the LORD your God delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD?” To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.”** (1 Sam. 15:21-22)

You could say that our fasting, our imposing of ashes, and even these midweek Lenten services are a kind of sacrifice to God. And they can serve a good purpose. Fasting can help us focus on spiritual things. The ashes can remind us of our humble position before God—and we have plenty of reason to confess that we are but dust and ashes! And the additional services enable us to look more carefully at what Jesus endured for our sake and to better understand why he did it and how it profits us. But if these Lenten rituals are just empty tokens, actions with no deeper meaning to them, then we ought not to fool ourselves by thinking that they’re pleasing to God.

David explains why this is the case in the next verse

He says, *“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit.”* Once again, David’s words bring me up short and make me wonder. Are you telling me that God delights when my spirit is broken? A broken spirit isn’t a good thing, is it? I thought when they tamed horses they wanted to make those horses tame enough to ride, but *without* breaking the spirit. I thought when you raised children the goal was to *“shape the will without breaking the spirit.”* I suppose you could break horses by whipping them into submission and you could get children to obey by intimidating or battering them, but the cost would be a broken spirit.

But think about the circumstances under which David wrote this psalm. The heading of the psalm says, **“A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.”** There was a spiritual problem with David before he ever saw Bathsheba or sent messengers to bring her to the palace, before he ever slept with her. Doesn’t David imply that when he says in this psalm, **“Renew a right spirit within me”**? David had experienced success upon success. The golden age of Israel had begun and he was the man in charge. His spirit was proud. In his arrogance he thought he could do as he pleased: take another man’s wife as his own, kill that man to cover his sin, and then go on as if nothing had happened. That’s the kind of spirit David had shown.

Thankfully, the prophet Nathan came to do God's work of breaking David's spirit. Nathan's preaching of God's law opened David's eyes to the horror of what he had done and showed him what he deserved to suffer on that account. At last the thick wall that David had put up to keep from thinking about his sin had been broken down. He confesses that he is sinful from birth, sinful from the time his mother conceived him. Repeatedly he asks God to wash away his sins, to forgive him and to cleanse him.

If we are to be saved, we must all experience what David experienced. If our spirit is proud and self-righteous, if we're unwilling to confess our sins and if we haven't come to terms with the fact that we deserve eternal punishment for our sins, then we also won't see our need of a Savior. If, like the Pharisee Jesus told about, we're content to compare ourselves with what we view as the dregs of society and come off feeling pretty good about ourselves, our spirit isn't right yet. That's the danger, I think, especially when things are going well for us. A little voice inside of us would like to convince that things are going so well because we're so good, so smart, so talented. We almost think that God ought to feel honored to have people like us as his own. "Save that grace, God; I don't need it. Use it on someone else." Who are we kidding? Take a look at what's in our hearts. Where do those foul thoughts that go riffing through our brains come from? How about those unkind words that come tumbling from our mouths? We're sinners! The sinful thoughts and words and deeds are just the evidence of what lies within us.

The broken spirit, the broken and contrite heart admits this. **"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin."** (51:1-2) And God will not despise such broken and contrite hearts. His promise is, **"Whoever comes to me I will never drive away."** (John 6:37) In his unfailing love, God planned our redemption. In his great compassion he sent Jesus to offer his righteous life for our unrighteous lives. In Holy Baptism he washed us from all our iniquity and cleansed us from our sin. Our hostility with God is at an end—through Jesus. God reconciled us to himself through the death of his Son. That fact—and the amazing love behind it—are going to be the focus of our Lenten meditations this year as we see Jesus paying for our sins and bringing us into God's presence.

So...what are we going to do with Lent? There are all kinds of customs and traditions for observing Lent. Even the season of Lent itself is a tradition. What's important is that the traditions help us get to the heart of the matter, so that with broken and contrite hearts we look in faith to Jesus who by his blood has cleansed us from all sin. Amen.