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Study guide

On giving up and taking on

By Robert C. Blezard

Lent is the season when we seek to draw closer to Jesus by taking on simple disciplines for the 40 days (not including Sundays) between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. Whether it involves adding something positive to your life or subtracting something, the point is to strengthen you spiritually and increase your awareness of God in your life. What do you do?

Exercise 1: Your Lenten practices

- Share with one another: What practices or disciplines have you embraced to observe Lent in the past? What things have you given up? What practices have you taken on? Why?
- What was that experience like? Were you able to be faithful to the disciplines throughout Lent? Was it easy or hard? How did you grow? What did you learn?
- How have your Lenten disciplines changed over time? Are you ready for a new and deeper challenge?

Exercise 2: Disciplines and practices

- What are the differences between practices and disciplines? How are they related? In what ways do disciplines require practice? In what ways does a practice require discipline? Can you have one without the other?
- When it comes to faith formation and spiritual growth, what is a good balance between practice and discipline?
- As long as you observe them regularly and with attention, is there a difference if you call your spiritual exercises “practices” or “disciplines”?

Exercise 3: Discipline and disciple

- Notice how the words “discipline” and “disciple” are related. What do you see as the connection between the two? What kind of discipline is needed to be a disciple of Jesus? What kind of discipline do you, personally, summon in order to observe practices consistently, such as going to church regularly, tithing (or honoring a financial commitment), praying daily, reading the Bible, etc.? What kind of a disciple is someone who lacks discipline?
- If you show more discipline, do you think you’d grow into a better dis-



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ciple? If you desire to be a better disciple, do you think you will work toward better discipline? Why is that so?

- How can special Lenten disciplines help you grow into a better disciple of Jesus?

Exercise 4: “No pain, no gain”

- Fitness buffs use the phrase “No pain, no gain” to describe a workout philosophy: If you aren’t pushing your body enough to cause a little discomfort or tiredness, you aren’t going to achieve better fitness. What truths does this statement reveal? Have you experienced this in your journey to become healthier through exercise?
- How might the phrase also apply to spiritual disciplines? If a spiritual practice is too easy to achieve, or too convenient to fulfill, what kind of spiritual growth can it lead to? For each of the following pairs of spiritual practice, imagine and compare the spiritual growth that might be gained.
 - A) I will pray every day.
 - B) I will pray for at least 15 minutes every day.
 - A) I will attend church as often as I can.
 - B) I will miss Sunday church service only for extraordinary reasons.
 - A) I will give up chocolate for Lent.
 - B) I will give up meat during Lent.
 - A) I will increase my weekly church offering by \$5 during Lent.
 - B) I will double my current offering during Lent.
 - A) I will read my Bible daily during Lent.
 - B) I will read my Bible for at least 20 minutes per day during Lent.
 - A) I will give up swearing during Lent.
 - B) I will give up talking negatively about other people during Lent.

Exercise 5: Disciplines to habits

- Have you ever given up a harmful dependency, such as smoking, over-eating, excessive caffeine or alcohol consumption? Can you describe the experience? How much discipline did it take? Was it easy? How much time did it take to conquer it?
- Have you ever undertaken a positive discipline, such as becoming a vegetarian, meditating for 30 minutes a day, losing 20 pounds, exercising three times a week or reading the Bible through every year? Describe the experience. How much discipline did it take? Was it easy?
- Whether you are giving up something harmful or taking on something



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positive, it's likely to be hard at first, but eventually it becomes a habit. Has this been your experience?

- How can Lenten practices help you to turn disciplines into habits? What would be the impact on your spiritual life?

Exercise 6: “Six Marks of Discipleship”

In his book *Real Faith for Real Life* (Augsburg Books, 2004), Lutheran pastor Michael W. Foss describes six practices that can help strengthen our faith. He lifts these up as time-honored practices that “mark the pathway of spiritual growth.” They are:

Daily prayer.

Weekly worship.

Daily Bible reading.

Serving in and beyond the congregation.

Nurturing spiritual relationships.

Giving beyond a tithe.

- Do you agree with Foss that these six constitute a good basic list of spiritual practices?
- Which among these do you already practice to some extent? How might you go “deeper” with them?
- Among those you may not practice, which would you like to explore? How might you go about it?
- What would it mean to embrace these practices with discipline? If you were to take on the practices with discipline, with which ones would you begin, and why? Which would you add on as time went by? What’s stopping you from beginning today?
- **For action:** Using Foss’ book as a guide, study and focus on one of the prayer practices for each of the weeks of Lent. If you are starting in mid-Lent, choose two of the practices per week. Do your best to be faithful with those practices.

Exercise 7: Lenten devotionals

A good daily Lenten devotional will provide spiritual sustenance for the season. Though all are different and many are organized around a theme, most devotionals offer a daily Scripture reading, a brief reflection and a prayer. Why not decide faithfully to use a Lenten devotional this year, either individually or as a study group? If as a group, share your experiences of committing to a daily devotion.



About the study guide author:



Rob Blezard is an assistant to the bishop in the Lower Susquehanna Synod. He holds degrees

from Boston University School of Theology and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa).

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There are a lot of good Lenten devotionals available for free online. Here are some:

- *Oh, Love, How Deep: 40 Days of Lenten Nourishment*, from Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn. (luthersem.edu/lent). Written by three Luther faculty and three students, this devotional is available free online or by email subscription.
- *From the Cradle to the Grave*, from Lutheran Hour Ministries (lhm.org/lent). You can browse daily for these Lenten devotional readings or sign up to have them delivered to you by email.
- *Free Indeed*, devotions focusing on Martin Luther for 2017, the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, from Augsburg Fortress. The print edition is sold out, but the ebook (for Kindle, Nook, Google) is available for \$2: store.augsburgfortress.org/store/product/22383/EBOOK-Free-Indeed-Devotions-for-Lent-2017.
- *Lent Devotional*, from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary (pts.edu/devotional_1), free, available for PDF download or online for daily browsing or audio listening. There's also an email sign-up or a devotional app for Android or Apple.

On giving up and taking on

By Tim Brown




Should we give something up or take something on in Lent? It seems the rules aren't quite as clear as they used to be: fish on Fridays, evening worship on Wednesdays, no alcohol or chocolate for a 40-day fast? What's the point?

The gift of the liturgical calendar is that it focuses the heart and mind on developing the spiritual tools necessary for the life of faith. We wait in Advent so we can cultivate the spiritual resources required for times of waiting. We celebrate at Christmas and practice spiritual gift-giving so we know how to give, and receive, gifts—including the gift of Christ.

And we turn inward in Lent so we know how to survive when the spiritual well is dry, despondent or gone altogether. Whether you take something on or give something up doesn't really matter. What matters is that whatever you do is intended to bring you back to the one who gives all and is all-in-all for the Christ follower.

Lent is a spiritual housecleaning intended to bring us back to ourselves and the God who first formed us from the ash we smudge on our foreheads that first day of this holy fast.

Here are some ideas around giving up and taking on this Lent that might do just that.

- **Take on intentional, personal prayer.** I have an app on my phone by “Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals” that pings me at 7:30 a.m., noon and 7 p.m., reminding me to take a moment to pray. It even provides me with prayers for the day so I don't go searching for words. You can find more at commonprayer.net.
- **Give up your meal—or at least transform it.** Perhaps on Mondays you'll make a meal of rice and beans mixed with a simple vegetable or side of fruit. And as you eat, you'll be mindful of the nearly 1.2 billion people around the world who live below the poverty line and spend half of their daily food expenditure on rice, and the more than 300 million people who use beans to keep malnutrition at bay. As a family, this could be a neat discipline of looking at a new culture every week and eating in solidarity with them.
- **Take on a greater fast: money.** Practice spending on only what you need in this season, and be strict about the definition of “need.” But do not pocket the savings. Practice the spiritual gift of generosity for others or a cause that seeks after God's *shalom* in the world. Pad your spiritual life, not your bank account.
- **Give up your table for others.** On Maundy Thursday, Jesus gathered with his friends. Can you make your own table a welcome one in this season of introspection? Hospitality is a spiritual discipline that allows us to see God in the other, and sometimes we find that we see God for the very first time. 

Download a study guide by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab at LivingLutheran.org.



Tim Brown is pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Raleigh, N.C. He blogs at reluctantxtian.wordpress.com.

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