

Column

The church season called Lent begins Feb. 14 . . . on Valentines' Day no less! Many Christians during this 40-day period leading up to Easter Day "give up something." For the more strict this may mean doing without all meat and dairy products. For others, it may mean giving up sugar in one's tea or coffee.

Is there any advantage in practicing voluntary self-denial? I believe there is . . . if we do it with the right motive. After all, Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount after condemning those who practiced self-denial in order to be "seen of men" proceeded to give His disciples instructions for when *they* fasted. "When ye fast, be not as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance," He tells them in Matthew 6:16.

This passage, along with others in the Gospels, suggests that Jesus not only approved of the practice but expected it of His followers, at least when it was undertaken for the right motive. But what is that right motive? May I suggest that the chief motive -- as with all undertakings for the Christian -- is to glorify God.

A second and corollary motive is to clear away some of the clutter that tends to accumulate in our lives, clutter that keeps us from being our best and His best.

The purpose of this practice, then, is to bring the body into subjection to the spirit. That is, to make our bodily appetites our servants and not our masters.

Few would argue that we -- especially in today's culture of abundance and excess -- often get this backward. Instead of eating to live, we live to eat. Instead of accepting the pleasures of life as gifts from the hand of a good God, we make gifts "gods" and ignore the Giver.

Giving up something we like and enjoy is one way of curbing this natural tendency. But having said this, let me qualify it by saying that Christians are not called to be long-faced ascetics or to despise the good gifts of creation.

On the contrary, they are called to enjoy and use these gifts wisely, with temperance and in thanksgiving to the One for whom and by whom all things were made -- our Lord Jesus Christ. If practicing some form of voluntary self-denial for a season can help us do this, then surely it is an act that is well pleasing in the sight of our Heavenly Father and His Son Jesus Christ.

There is also a positive aspect to self-denial. We can think of this discipline as giving something up so that we may take something on. For example, if I give up expensive meat, I have more room for healthy, green vegetables and more money to give to my favourite charity. Or, if I give up television two nights a week, I have more time to give to a good book and my prayers.

Nothing I have said thus far, however, should suggest "legalism" or trying to gain eternal life (life in God's new and coming age) by the works of my hands. No, we are put right with God only through the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ by faith and not by anything that we do. It is all of grace, from beginning to end.

But having said that, those who have been put right with God solely on the merits of Christ should be in the process of becoming actually righteous -- of growing in grace. Practicing self-denial should therefore be thought of as a tool of growth.

Jesus went into the wilderness to pray and fast for 40 days as He prepared to embark upon His public ministry. Should we not seek to follow His example? Let's prepare and get ready.

O LORD, who for our sake didst fast forty days and forty nights;

Give us grace to use such abstinence, that, our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey thy godly motions in righteousness, and true holiness, to thy honour and glory, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

The Rev. Victor H. Morgan is rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Blue Ridge.