

A TRUE LENT

Leonard J. Coppes, minister
Providence Presbyterian Church (OPC)

John 4:23-24, "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

There are a lot of good things about the season of Lent. It speaks of revival, purification, repentance, and disciplining the flesh. These are basic Christian themes. However, there are also certain drawbacks in the practice of Lent. Consider with me the opportunities and the limitations of Lent.

Lent provides opportunity to fulfill three positive Christian responsibilities: true heart preparation for worship, proper discipline of the will and proper discipline of the flesh.

First, biblical religion is fundamentally a religion of the heart. At its base, it is essentially spiritual in nature. It is hoped that all who engage in its practice are concerned about the heart of its practitioners. The ministry of Jesus as recorded in the Bible is a ministry to people who were so preoccupied with the externalities of religion that they missed, if not ignored, its true spiritual nature.

This spiritual core of true religion is the message of Jesus as is evidenced in Luke 3:8, "Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as *our* father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones." Although these are the words of John the Baptist, they express the message of Jesus. Any of the four Gospels evidences this in abundance. In Luke 17:21, for example, Jesus remarked, "...the kingdom of God is within you." The Kingdom He preached was a spiritual kingdom. John 3:5 expresses the central theme of this Kingdom. Jesus is dealing with Nicodemus, an acknowledged expert in the Jewish religion. He tells this ruler of the Jews, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." This is a way of telling him that he must be born again, that is, born from above. He had been born the first time and born of the flesh (below). To be in God's kingdom, to be a true practitioner of Jesus' religion, he needed to be born again. He needed to be born of the Spirit. The religion of Nicodemus was a merely external religion. But this was inadequate. He and all other practitioners of merely external religion need to be born from above.

Therefore, to be a true and faithful Christian one must be born again. This means that God must change one's heart as Jesus so repeatedly and eloquently explains. This is a path that starts with acknowledging that one's heart does not love God. As a result, he does not truly love God and His word. For, as Jesus said, "if you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). So, more than one's intentions is involved in this spiritual religion. It involves a true change of heart - preparation of the heart. God's word, the Bible and its commandments become the marching orders of such a person. There will be an inward heart change so that one loves God with all his heart, soul and mind. Moreover, one will seek to practice what God says in the Bible.

Second, Lent speaks of heart penance; the need to do acts of repentance, i.e., discipline of the will. It is certain that the Bible teaches that faith by itself, faith without works, is not the faith of Christianity.

True faith involves commitment to Christ's church. That church, however, must conform in practice and teaching to what the Bible teaches. As God said of the Old Testament preachers

and religious leaders, "to the teaching and the testimony! (compare their word and works to the Bible). If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them (they are false prophets)" (Isa. 8:20).

Part of this repentance is to seek forgiveness (absolution). Biblically speaking this is sought directly from God just as Jesus taught in the Lord's Prayer. Moreover, He said that He alone has the power to forgive sins on earth, "... know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins" (Matt. 9:6). The only priest that one should approach today is Jesus, the perfect and final high priest (Heb. 4:15-16, Acts 26:17-20, Jn. 6:62-65).

Third, Lent speaks of fasting and disciplining the flesh to serve the living God. To be certain, fasting is a biblical practice. Jesus supports it in Matt. 6:16-18 and 17:12. But the Bible adds other things the godly should do in the practice of true faith and repentance. In Luke 3:8 the Bible teaches true converts to "bear fruits worthy of repentance." We are not to depend on our traditional religion if it does not conform to the Bible. So the Scripture said to the Jews that they were not to depend on their descent from Abraham. To be sure, he was a truly godly man, but this is the very thing the Jews ignored. They did not seek true godliness in conforming their lives to what the Bible said, but they persisted in a twisted religion resting on its antiquity and the godliness of its "father" rather than its faithfulness to God's word.

To the Jews the Bible speaks of a proper keeping of the Law (the Bible). So, one who is truly penitent will work the works God commands. They were to apply God's Law to their roles in life, to what they were doing. The tax collector was not to oppress the people by demanding more tax than what was appointed. The soldier was not to oppress those under his authority (Luke 8:12-13). Or, as Jesus said we are to keep His commandments (Matt. 22:39, 7:12). Of course, just being good, even when it is in keeping with God's law, does not gain us entrance into God's kingdom (Matt. 19:17-21). One must be godly. One must love God with all his heart, soul and mind. One must be truly born again.

Finally, Lent speaks of fasting and otherwise disciplining the flesh. To that end, participants are urged to fast and pray. Jesus also spoke of such matters. But these religious works are, in themselves, inadequate as we have already seen. Nicodemus (Jn. 3) and the rich young ruler (Matt. 19) prayed and fasted much, but this discipline of the flesh did not gain them the eternal life, the true religion, preached by Jesus. They still had to be born again. Good works must be joined by a godly heart.

Thus, the Bible speaks of true acts of repentance, spiritual preparation for worship, spiritual practice of worship, and spiritual practice during worship.

One more matter remains. It is what God teaches us about true worship in the Bible. True worship is worship in accordance to what God commands. False worship is what man creates, however sincerely, to worship God. True worship sets aside the outward expression of worship God commanded for the Old Testament times. The old form of worship consists of shadows of things to come (Jesus). True worship has no priest but Christ. It is the substance of things and is bound only by the word of God. God expressly says that the Old Testament and Jewish regulations on eating and drinking are now set aside. We are free from them (Col. 2:16). So, too, we are free from the religious calendar of the Old Testament. Believers should not be bound in worship matters by the Old Testament and Jewish regulations (2:20-21). To be bound by such things is to accept a mere appearance of wisdom and is to practice self-imposed religion in worship. Hence, in matters of worship one must ask what does God require of us today? It is still true that what God commands, and only what God commands is what we should do.

Hence, the question before us is, ultimately, is the practice of Ash Wednesday and the subsequent Lent season a biblical practice or is it the mere appearance of wisdom? Where are

these things commanded in the Bible? Moreover, when outward practices are substituted for true spiritual worship then the truth of Jesus Christ is relegated to the background. Let us put such self-made practices behind us and turn to Jesus in Spirit and in truth.

Let us repent of our sin. Let us acknowledge that we have an inward commitment to sin that apart from God's help we cannot shake. We have a mental disposition against what God says in the Bible. We do not see His will expressed in the Bible. We do not submit ourselves to what it says because we do not accept it as expressing His will. We do not practice what it teaches nor hunger to know what it truly says. Let us truly repent of our sin and believe in Jesus as our Lord and King.