



Christ's Three-Part Recipe for Lent

(Matthew 6:14-21)

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In the Gospel lesson in the Orthodox lectionary prescribed for the Sunday before Great Lent (Cheese-fare Sunday), the Lord Jesus offers us a three-part recipe for Lent: forgiveness, fasting, and laying up treasures in heaven.

Forgiveness

The trouble with our world today is that we have built too many walls. There was the Iron Curtain. The Bamboo Curtain. Walls between the races, between husbands and wives, parents and children. Walls between man and God. One of the best ways to tear down walls is by forgiveness.

The walls between man and God are built by sin. During Great Lent the Church calls upon us to look at the cross of Jesus and His great mercy. She invites us to come to Christ during this time in the great Sacrament of Confession to exchange our sins for the riches of His Grace, to taste and experience for ourselves the sweetness of His forgiving love.

Having received His forgiveness, God calls on us to grant forgiveness to all who have hurt us and also to seek forgiveness from those whom we have hurt. God offers us His forgiveness very graciously and generously. But, His forgiveness obligates us to forgive others. This is exactly what Jesus says in this Gospel passage: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matthew 6:14-15) Christianity begins with the forgiveness of our Lord. But it does not end there. Because I have been forgiven and daily am being forgiven by God for my many sins, I am obligated to forgive others.



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So Lent becomes a time for tearing down walls first between man and God and then between neighbors. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann has written in his book Great Lent:

“The triumph of sin, the main sign of its rule over the world, is division, opposition, separation, hatred. Therefore, the first break through this fortress of sin is forgiveness; the return to unity, solidarity, love. To forgive is to put between me and my ‘enemy’ the radiant forgiveness of God Himself.”

Our first challenge for Great Lent is to receive God’s forgiveness and to forgive.



Fasting

The second part of our Lord’s recipe for Great Lent consists of fasting: “When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face that your fasting may not be seen by man but by your Father who sees in secret: and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6:17-18)

There are many valid reasons for fasting but the main one is love. Love was one of the main purposes for fasting in the early Church. An ancient Christian writer, Hermas, writing when Christianity was less than a century old, reported an interview with an angel on the subject of fasting. Asked what sort of fast he was keeping, Hermas replied that he was fasting in the customary manner. The angel was not impressed. He replied that Hermas hadn’t the fuzziest notion of what a genuinely Christian fast is, and that what he was doing was pointless. The angel went on to say that if fasting is to have meaning, one should keep careful track of how much money is saved by it, and give the savings to the poor and needy.

Another early Christian, Aristides, writes in his “Apology,” “If there is a poor person among the Christians and they do not have the means to help him, they fast two or three days and give the food that they have saved through fasting to the hungry person.”

During Great Lent we are called upon to fast not only for reasons of self-control and prayer, but also for reasons of love: to deny ourselves something that we may share what we have saved with a needy person.

One family in a parish in America decided to have a meal of just rice once a week during Lent since that is the daily diet of hundreds of millions of people in the

world. When Lent was over, the family decided to continue the practice year-round once a month. The money that was saved was put into a special envelope and given through their church to the poor in the world. They could have cut out some other luxury item, but they felt that the rice meal helped them identify with those who didn't enjoy such bounty.

Another overweight American wanted to lose some weight but do it in a Christian manner. He figured that if medical science could transplant kidneys and hearts and other organs, that he could "transplant" some of his extra pounds to some starving person in the world. So he put a picture of child emaciated from hunger on his refrigerator door. Every time he was tempted to grab an unnecessary snack he had to face the image of the child. The money that he saved by not buying such snacks was given to his parish's hunger fund and his extra pounds "transplanted" to others.

The Lord God said through the prophet Isaiah: "Is not this the fast that I choose ... to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover him..." (Isaiah 58:6-7). And St. John Chrysostom says: "Do you fast? Give me proof by your works ... If you see a poor man take pity on him." This is the fast that is pleasing to God.

The Triodion, which contains our church services for Lent, says the following about the Lenten fast:

*The Lenten spring has come,
The light of repentance...
Let us receive the announcement
of Lent with joy!
For if our forefather Adam
had kept the fast,
We would not be deprived of paradise...*

*While fasting physically, brothers,
Let us also fast spiritually;
Let us loose every knot of iniquity,
Let us tear up every unrighteous bond,
Let us distribute bread to the
hungry and welcome
to our homes those who have no
roof over their heads
So that we may receive great mercy
from Christ our God.*



Treasures in Heaven

After forgiveness and fasting the third part of Christ's recipe for Lent is expressed in His words:

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal: for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matthew 6:19-21)

The question God puts before us in this Gospel lesson is: What treasures have you laid up for yourselves in heaven? What security will you have when you face the final hour? What will you be able to claim as yours when you appear before the throne of God? Granted, God means that we should live our life upon this earth to its fullest, but He also intends that we should live it as a preparation for what is to come. The question we must ask ourselves is: Are we laying up treasures in this life only? Or are we using this life to lay up eternal treasures – treasures that shall be ours for all eternity?

All our treasures on earth – said Jesus – will last only as long as this life. They are "rust collectors." They will all end up in the junkyard. But in Jesus we find treasures that never lose their value.

The first and foremost treasure is the treasure of love. "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all that I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned but have not love, I gain nothing.

Now remain faith, hope, and love these three; but the greatest of these is love." (I Cor. 13:1-3; 13) To be rich in love is to be rich indeed.

There is the treasure of forgiveness that we spoke about above. The strongest walls which separate nations and people are not built by iron or steel, but are created by fear, hatred, and prejudice. The only way to break down these walls is through the practice of forgiveness.

There is the treasure of knowing Jesus personally as our Lord and Savior. Lent is the time to strengthen our relationship with the most important person in the universe: the Lord Jesus. Through extra prayer, daily reading of His word in the Holy Bible, by frequent participation in Holy Communion, and by faithfully attending the extra liturgical services of Great Lent, we can deepen our relationship with Christ and establish Him firmly on the throne of our heart.

Our lives are too cluttered with unessential and negative activities that prohibit us from laying up heavenly treasures. Lent is a time to weed out and cancel some of these unnecessary activities and create time for God and the accumulation of heavenly treasures.

There are the treasures of prayer and doing God's will. Jesus says, "He who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother." (Matthew 12:50) True nobility said St. John Chrysostom consists in doing the will of God. And in the treasure of prayer we have the awesome privilege of speaking and communing with our loving Lord at any hour of the day or night.

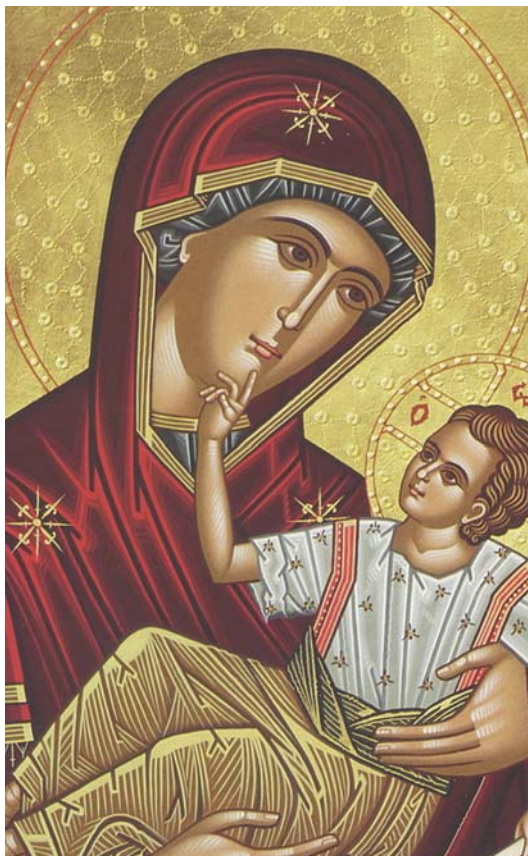
What a treasure to constantly have the ear of God in prayer!

And finally, there is the treasure of service to others in the name of Christ. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, while preaching on the Last Judgment scene in Matthew 25, proclaimed:

“I am fearful of that ‘left hand side’ and of ‘the goats’ ... because they have not ministered to Christ through those in need ... Let us take care of Christ then, while there is still time: let us visit Christ in his sickness, let us give to Christ to eat, let us clothe Christ in his nakedness, let us do honor to Christ, and not only at table, as some do, not just with precious ointment, like Mary, nor just with a tomb, like Joseph of Arimathea ... but let us give him his honor in his needy ones, in those who lie on the ground here before us this day.”

A recently canonized martyr, St. Maria Skobtsova, a Russian Orthodox émigré nun who lived in France came to this conclusion about the same passage in Matthew 25:

“The way to God lies through love of people. At the Last Judgment I shall not be asked whether I was successful in my ascetic exercises, nor how many bows and prostrations I made. Instead I shall be asked, Did I feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoners. That is all I shall be asked. About every poor, hungry, and imprisoned person the Savior says ‘I; I was hungry, and thirsty, I was sick and in prison.’ To think that he puts an equal sign between himself and anyone in need ... I always knew it, but now it has somehow penetrated to my sinews. It fills me with awe.”



These, then, are the treasures that really count in God’s eyes, treasures that are not “rust collectors” but that will last forever: the treasure of love, forgiveness, knowing Jesus personally, prayer, doing God’s will, and service to our fellow human beings through the fast of love.

A ruler once threatened that he would take everything away from St. John Chrysostom. The great saint replied, “My treasure is in heaven and you can never take that away from me.”

This Great Lent why not try Christ’s three-part recipe: forgiveness, fasting, and laying up treasures in heaven. You will find it to be the perfect recipe if you are looking not only for a resurrected Christ, but also a resurrected you this Pascha!

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