Understanding the Language of Lent

By

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If you will, you can keep the commandments, they will save you; if you trust in God, you too shall live; he has set before you fire and water to whichever you choose, stretch forth your hand. Before man are life and death, good and evil, whichever he chooses shall be given him. Immense is the wisdom of the Lord; he is mighty in power, and all-seeing. The eyes of God are on those who fear him; he understands man’s every deed. No one does he command to act unjustly, to none does he give license to sin. (Sirach 15:15-20)

What if you were given several propositions that would ensure a closer relationship with Jesus Christ and his Church? Would you take head of these propositions? Or, would you simply brush them off and continue on your merry way. Sirach presents to us an examination of conscience of sorts with several “what if” statements.

**An Examination of Conscience**

In verse 15, Sirach proposes if we can keep the commandments they will save us. Extracting this point even further, if we assent to the one true God and forgo our little gods that deviate our devotion to Him, then our salvation becomes clearer. The second proposal says if we trust in Him, then our relationship with Him is more tangible. The next proposal is quite direct and fitting. God sets before us fire and water, and to whatever we choose we stretch out our hands. Fire and water serve as figurative examples of good and evil as the following verse details. And this becomes the quintessential point of the entire passage. Our Father in Heaven will always make propositions for us to choose His love. Only we can freely choose to reject it. He will never impose Himself upon us in a matter that does not offer us a choice.

**Lent’s Propositions**

 The liturgical season of Lent (Mt 4) can be met with great joy and anticipation. Some reading this article may already be saying; “Are you kidding?” However, we must not forget that Jesus Christ always places and proposes opportunities for us to grow in intimacy with him. Lent proposes two things. **One**: an inward and outward desire to perform acts of penance (penitential acts). Examples of these acts are confession, abstaining from certain things, sacrificial acts to help others (corporal and spiritual works of mercy). **Two**: renewal of our baptismal call. During this penitential season, we are reminded of Christ’s Paschal Mystery (Life, Death, Resurrection, Ascension) and the journey He embraced to resuscitate our humanity from sin. His Resurrection springs Hope eternal of His conquering of sin and releasing His love for His people to continue His mission on earth through the Church (Lk 24: 1-12; Acts 2:1-29; 37-42).

**Understanding the Language**

Fasting, abstinence, penance, confession, and, suffering sound like harsh words on the surface when first pronounced. However, when reflected against the suffering of Christ on the Cross, the words of grace, mercy, and, joy reflect how He loved us so much He would endure the most inhumane conditions to open the gates of Heaven (Jn 3:16-17; 30). Our Joy rests in the beautiful gifts He left for us in the beauty of the Church and the sacramental life in particular the Holy Eucharist the source and summit of our Christian life (CCC 1324).

**The Catechism reminds us:**

Jesus’ temptation reveals the way in which the Son of God is Messiah contrary to the way Satan proposes to him and the way men wish to attribute to him. This is why Christ vanquished the Tempter for us: For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sinning. By the solemn forty days of Lent the Church unites each year to the mystery of Jesus in the desert. (540)

Lent serves as an opportunity for renewal, recognition of our sinful nature, willingness to fast and abstain, and most importantly relieve ourselves of those vices that continually nag us. Don’t think for a minute that I am oblivious to the challenges we face every day when it comes to sin. My own direct limitations hungrily call for a continual renewal in my own soul which reflects how many times I have denied our Lord. The key is recognizing these situations and seeking an intimacy filled with the joy of Christ in our hearts.

We are called to be people of action during Lent. This requires openness to God’s grace by the recognition of our own sinful nature and seeking repentance. Reflecting back to Sirach, the end of this particular passage is quite striking. God does not call us to act unjustly, nor does he give us license to sin. We choose these acts. It is our desire to turn away from Christ and His Church where sin takes hold. This is why the sacraments become more tantamount in our journey with Christ and the reawakening of our Baptism. I leave you with these penetrating words from the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all of our heart, and end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed. At the same time it entails the desire and resolution to change one’s life, with hope in God’s mercy and trust in the help of his grace. This conversion of heart is accompanied by a salutary pain and sadness which the Fathers called animi cruciatus (affliction of the spirit) and compunction cordis (repentance of heart). (1431)