

# Lent III

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[ 0 : 00 ] May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

One of the greatest truths of the Christian faith is that God has graciously acted through Jesus Christ on our behalf. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us, the ungodly. And through our baptism, we experienced an exorcism, the exorcism of Christ. He has redeemed us, and he has placed us in his kingdom. On the third Sunday of Lent, we hear in our gospel text about another kind of exorcism.

Jesus frees a man from a devil, and this man was free to speak and to praise God. But because of this, accusations arose from some of the Jews that Jesus was casting out devils through Beelzebub, the chief of devils.

In various arguments, Jesus declares that actually this is impossible. Him casting out devils is actually a sign that the kingdom of God has come to them. The reign of Satan is ending.

[ 1 : 09 ] What he says next, though, is most important for us today. After talking about how Jesus is casting out devils by divine power and not through demonic power, he gives a short parable about a devil being exorcised.

When the spirit has been exorcised from a man, it is cast out in search of someone else to torment or to find rest. But then, when it cannot find anybody else, it goes back to the one it previously was residing in.

Speaking of the person as a house, the spirit comes back and sees that the house has been cleansed and it has been renovated. But there is no one else that is living there. So the spirit goes out and it brings seven other spirits with him and they all take residence within the house.

And the man is now worse off than he was when he was only possessed by one spirit. The one who hears this can do one of two things. One can hear the words of Christ and, like the Pharisees, disregard the spiritual teaching that he gives us.

We can offer lip service to God. We can participate in the liturgy and we can cross ourselves. We can genuflect and we can bow at the correct times. But if we do all these things to please God, to make him love us, while at the same time not living lives of love and charity in the world, we are making the same mistake that Israel did.

[ 2 : 33 ] In Lent, we fast from a number of things, usually things like alcohol or things like sweets and flesh meat on Wednesdays and Fridays. We must be careful to not become like the Pharisees in our fasting.

As Jesus says, Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead man's bones and all uncleanness.

Even so, you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. The other option is to heed the words of Christ.

We can now take the initiative to grow in our spiritual lives, rather than be like the empty house in the parable. When Christ freed us from sin and death, we were not meant to remain dormant.

Remember what happened to us in our baptism. We, like Israel, were freed from our oppression. Our oppression was not Egypt, but it was the oppression and rule of Satan.

[ 3 : 37 ] Satan ruled over our hearts, and sin was his instrument of choice to keep us away from God. But through our baptism, we were freed from this bondage, and we were placed in the kingdom of God, in fellowship with Christ and his saints.

This was our exorcism. And in this exorcism, we were given the seeds of faith, of hope, and of charity. And through the grace of God and our participation with him, we can grow in those three things.

We were freed from sin in order to be free for Christ. We were taken from a kingdom that thrives on death and on decay, and placed into a kingdom filled with love and life.

And that kingdom is none other than the kingdom of God. If our fasting becomes something that is put on for show, or it provides us with a reason to become proud, and to see our success as solely from ourselves, we are inviting the vices and sins that once existed within us and were exercised from us back into our souls.

Our fasting is not an end of itself. The purpose of our fasting is to draw closer to God and to humble ourselves through fasting, recognizing our need for God.

[ 4 : 52 ] Fasting is a means of rending our hearts and not our garments. It has always had a spiritual purpose. And when fasting is done the right way, it can be a great source of hope and encouragement, because it reminds us that we are not the rulers nor the masters of our own universes.

We are not self-made men and women. We are children in need of Almighty God and the grace of Jesus Christ. Let the words of our collect today be our prayer as we continue to fast this season. We beseech thee, Almighty God, look upon the hearty desires of thy humble servants and stretch forth the right hand of thy majesty to be our defense against all our enemies, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us make sure that our fasting does not invite pride and superiority in our hearts, but humility and acceptance of the grace of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.