

“Rend your hearts, not your garments”. These words of Scripture that we have just heard spoken by the Prophet Joel are an indication that God expects more from us than shallow outward appearances. In other words, putting on a show is not enough. The change He seeks is to be initiated deep within us, and the change He desires is more than a minute movement of the heart.

The word “rend” means to tear away or to wrench. The “tearing away” of what is old will allow God to fill our hearts anew. What is God calling you and me to “tear away”? What worldly cares consume your consciousness? What material attachments are like chains that bind my freedom and weigh heavy on my soul? What vices keep nagging you with MORE?

Are you tired of all the world’s and the devil’s empty promises? Am I ready for the reprieve that the human soul desires? Are we ready to allow a God who is all merciful to enter in to our hearts anew this Lent and to deeply care for us as He has promised? If so, what is the next step?

We need to make a conscious decision to turn to God. When we do we are saying, “I can’t do it on my own, God, I need your help.” This takes a bit of humility, but we simply need to ask for God’s help and His grace will begin to manifest. Giving up control allows God, who is love and mercy itself, permission to enter and to begin the heart reconstruction.

Then, we need to turn away from – or tear away - all that is not of God. In a word, REPENT. That is what we hear in the first reading today from the Prophet Joel. God is calling the people to turn back to Him with a repentant heart. (Here is where the Sacrament of Confession is such a great gift.) When we do, God will show us His mercy. God will do His part and we will begin to experience a new freedom.

Lastly, we must listen to the Spirit of God and begin to do God’s will.

The Church gives us the framework for turning back to God. From the USCCB website:

*During Lent, we are asked to devote ourselves to seeking the Lord in prayer and reading Scripture, to service by giving alms, and to practice self-control through fasting. Many know of the tradition of abstaining from meat on Fridays during Lent, but we are also*

*called to practice self-discipline and fast in other ways throughout the season. In addition, the giving of alms is one way to share God's gifts—not only through the distribution of money, but through the sharing of our time and talents. As St. John Chrysostom reminds us: "Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours, but theirs." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2446)*

In the today's Gospel Jesus speaks of a reward given by the Father for each of these practices; prayer, fasting, and almsgiving when done in secret. That is, these practices of self-denial, when done in secret, will be rewarded by the heavenly Father. While Jesus does not address the timing of the reward (will it be in this life or only in the next?), we know that God is faithful and will carry out His promises. We know that the reward will be realized *in this life* and in the *next*. Isn't it great that we have a God who loves us this much? God is promising to reward us for doing the things that will ultimately make us happy? When we give up control, turn to God in a spirit of repentance, and seek to do God's will, we show our love for God and we begin to experience a freedom and a joy that the world cannot give. With regard to the heavenly eternal reward, Scripture tells us, "What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love Him."

This Lent let us prepare a way for the Lord anew by wrenching out all that is not of God. When worldly cares try to take away our peace, let us turn to prayer and the Word of God and receive Him who is love and mercy. When MORE seems to grab our imagination, let us instead imagine the gift of joy we'll receive by being a cheerful giver. When we are tempted by vices, let us focus on the fruit of freedom we'll bear when we practice the discipline of fasting. Most of all this Lent let us REPENT – "turn away from" all that separates us from God and turn toward God, to seek His mercy and love.

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