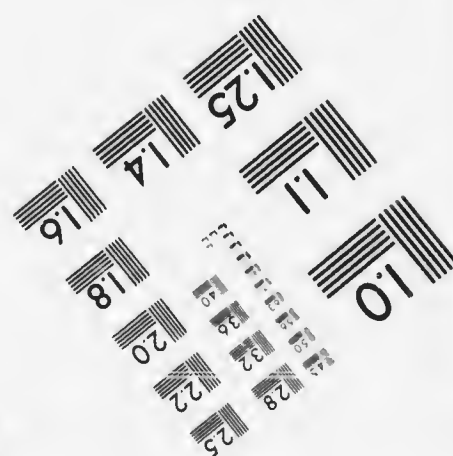
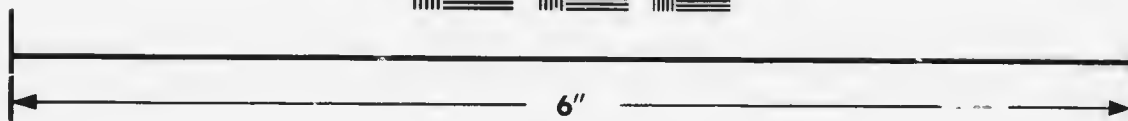
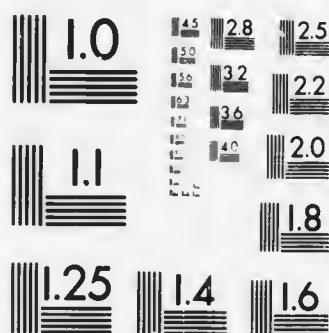


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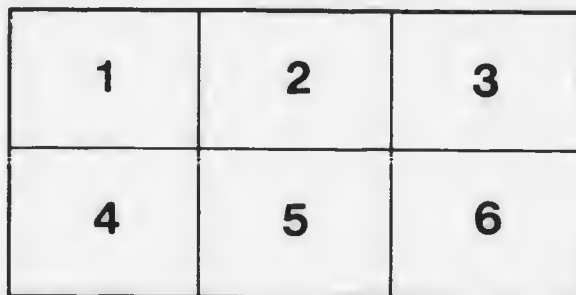
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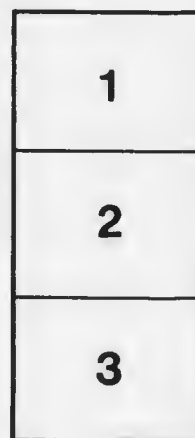
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AND HOW TO KEEP IT.

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LENT, AND HOW TO KEEP IT.

THE WORK OF REPENTANCE, &c.

THE Church teaches us much with respect to this work by setting apart the forty days of Lent, in which we may follow it up with prayer and fasting, and self-denial. She teaches us that, in *her* judgment, that "worthy lamenting of our sins" which is the means of "obtaining perfect remission and forgiveness," requires that we should withdraw from the pleasures and works, of this world, and detach ourselves from its entanglements. And in the Gospel for the day, and the portion of Scripture appointed for the Epistle, we have our Lord's approval of fasting, and the command of it by one of His inspired prophets, which both lead us to the same kind of thoughts and shew us that withdrawing from things that please the flesh is one of the needful steps in drawing near to God.

And such has been the practice of the saints, not only in praying for themselves, and those who might suffer for their own sins, like David, but also interceding for the people of God at large, like Daniel. Not as though man could make a bargain with God, and by giving up so much of what would please the flesh make

It should have been Ash-Wednesday

atonement for so much sin of his own or another's, but because self-denial and separation from the world is an appointed way of drawing near to God, and renouncing every thing that is against Him.

All remission of sin must be through the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ; no other can put it away. Yet is this forgiveness brought home to us by sundry means, and we cannot have it if we will not do what he has put in the way toward obtaining it. Sin is not forgiven while we abide in it, and even when we do repent of a sin or of a sinful course, we do not always repent of it so wholly but that something of it still hangs about us, for which we have still to answer before God, and which hinders the fulness of His grace from being shed abroad in our hearts, and sometimes calls for sharp correction at His hands.

Now the business of this season is not only to examine whether there be any such thing within us, but also to put out of the way such things as are hindrances to our finding it out, and to make actual trial of ourselves, for the sake of exercise, in some points in which sin is not unlikely to have a hold of us, besides humbling ourselves before God for all our past shortcomings and misdoings.

It is well to keep in view the search after our own faults, because a fault is not cured in a day, and because if there are any great faults

lying by us neglected, they will be a hindrance to all our work.

Let us think then of some of the ways in which sin hangs about us when we think we have forsaken it. One of these ways is by its still keeping a hold of our thoughts, so that we remember with pleasure, or in some way take pleasure in thinking of wrong things that we have done, or such as are like them. This is not hard to find out if we have the will, and must be wholly renounced if we would have our repentance complete and our pardon entire. Watchfulness over our thoughts at this season will help much toward curing us of this evil. What do we commonly imagine as *what we should like*? Do we carefully check ourselves if it is a covetous or other wrong thought?

But there are some more subtle ways in which sin lurks about its old haunts, and requires to be well looked for before it is found out. One of these is a certain weakness of will that is apt to arise from often letting the wrong bent of our nature have its way. This is very likely to remain with us if we have been cured of a sinful habit not by any vigorous effort to master the temptation, but rather by the help of some change of circumstances that puts us under control or makes the temptation less. When that is the case, we are apt to remain just as weak and self-indulgent in something else, as in the sin we think we have forsaken:

it may be in some lesser matter, that we hardly think of as amounting to a sin, but still it is an evil that we ought to find out and cure, if we wish to have our sin wholly cleared away. Eating and drinking for mere pleasure, not taking trouble to do things well, or in due time, and the like, may come from our old sins.

Another way in which sin hangs about us is in our attachment to things of this world, and likings for this and that indulgence; or again what is very nearly allied to such likings, attachment to the praise of men. If we have been in any respect given to taking our own way, and not minding to keep the path of duty, such inclinations are apt to have a very strong hold on us, so that we find it very hard to withstand them when duty calls for it. Self-will does not shew itself openly, but it has plenty of room to hide itself in these things, and lies there for a length of time in quiet possession, and in strength enough to master our own better mind when any trial comes.

Again there are ways of speaking and acting which do not come at once under any acknowledged rule, but which are yet very much like such as are forbidden, and so near to them that we take up with them instead of the others, and put the same mind into them, while we think we are safe from blame. One common case is that of words near akin to cursing and swearing, which many people think they may use freely.

while they are really indulging a bad state of mind, and setting a dangerous example to others. And in matters of personal self-indulgence there is often a compromise of this kind made with sin, instead of a complete renouncing of it, which as long as it remains will make us weak in what is good, and keep us on the borders of known sin.

Sometimes sin will leave upon us a habit of holding to nothing, and never keeping the same mind for any length of time. This comes of that double-mindedness which St. James mentions as a great fault, when we have been trying to serve two masters, and so have not held fast to Him whose will ought always to be our rule of life. If repentance is not very thorough, these unstable ways are likely to remain with us in many things; and whenever they are found they are at least a sign that something is not right, and leaving them off will be a step toward regaining what we have lost by sin.

Sometimes it will stay by us in the shape of hard thoughts of others, or readiness to think evil of them, or again in envious, grudging ways, which keep us from showing true Christian love to them, even when they do not amount to wilful and deadly sin. A very deep and thorough repentance searches these out, but the common repentance of half-worldly Christians leaves them very nearly where it found them, and needs many sharp trials at God's hand to purge them out.

Many other shapes there are in which sin stays by us if we are not mindful to root it out thoroughly, such as want of truthfulness, thoughtlessness about others, dislike of devotion, &c.; and in this holy season we must strive to set all means at work for finding where it is and clearing away all that remains of it. Such is fasting itself, if rightly used, and not managed with as little self-denial as we can, just to keep a rule, but relieved only by what is necessary for business or health.

It is not serving God without an especial call, to do harm to our bodies, which are His own work; but the body will best serve its highest purposes, waiting on the soul in worship or meditation, when it is somewhat subdued; and even for works of mercy that require strength it is not so fit when proud and over-full. And what stays by us from sins of the body will be best found out by putting the body to some trial. So much ought to be done as to be a really painful exercise to the natural man, that a real trial may be made and a real change wrought.

Self-denial, then, will serve in the first place for chastisement, laid by our own will upon our known past sins, that, judging ourselves, we may not be judged of the Lord. This is to be not as though we could make up for them, but because we hate them, and wish to take from ourselves the ungodly pleasure we thought to gain by them.

Secondly, it will serve to unbind us from the things that have been most apt to draw us into evil, and in so doing very often to make known to us where our temptations lie, and where sin still lurks. For we must be too fond of that, which we cannot readily give up for a while for the service of God.

Thirdly, it will serve to put us in the way of doing our duty, especially if we try to make it a discipline of orderly living. Many have learned to practise in seasons of devotion what was of use to them afterward through their lives. Early hours, leaving off pleasant employments in due time, taking up hard ones punctually, saving time for devotion, self-denying alms, self-examination, have been learned or improved in such seasons. And every one of these is not only of use in itself to the Christian life, but is also contrary to an evil habit in which there is sin, and in which there may be great sin for us to repent of.

Fourthly, room is made for spiritual work, and that not only because time is kept clear for it, by putting other engagements out of the way, but also because the mind is kept more free to apply to it, by removing that which might take hold of the thoughts, and throw doubts into the will. It is true that the Lord's day is devoted to the work of religion, which becomes on that day the business of those who are obliged to give the labour of other days to worldly works.

But that day may be well taken up, after the common acts of worship, and the relief needful to our wearied powers, with some easier spiritual exercise. We need a longer time, and one in which the *laborious* work of religion may have a suitable place, and may stand for a while instead of the work of this world. Some things that are labours at first may come to be even ease and relief to us after a while; but there is work to be done with the soul, that is too hard, at least in the beginning of it, for the ordinary course of the Lord's Day, and calls for a season set apart for it, and cleared, as far as may be, from all hindrances.

One great part of this work is *self-examination*, which every one who has not yet done it thoroughly, ought to carry back to the earliest recollections of his life, and through the inmost recesses of his thoughts. This will take time, and will require in most cases a good deal of care and arrangement. For we are apt to be most blind, where we are most wrong, and yet if we do not keep the whole of God's law in view, for each part of our life, we may pass over great breaches of it without finding them out. It is true that many persons will at once be aware of certain great sins which they well know they have committed, and which they fix upon at once as the chief offences they can be charged with before God. But it does not follow that these are all their great sins, or all that they might find out if they would look for them. Nor.

again, if we do not know of any such, can we at all fairly presume that it is because there are no great sins to be laid to our charge, unless we have made diligent search to know whether it is so or not.

It is well, therefore, to use some such plan as the following, when we can take time to it, and work out each part carefully. Let our life be divided into periods, such as childhood, boyhood, youth, early manhood, active life, or such others as may be marked in each one's own history. Then let us take the Ten Commandments, expounded and applied to the various duties of life, as most of us have learned from the Sermon on the Mount, and from the Church Catechism, and the explanations of these, and think whether we kept each of those laws faithfully during one period of our lives, before we go on to another period. And if we know ourselves to have any particular besetting sin, that is now or has lately been more powerful over us than others, let us be careful to search out the very earliest beginnings of it, and find out, if possible, when and how it stole in upon us, and in what manner we first grievously departed from God.

Of course this way of proceeding will be a work of days, if not of weeks, and each period may require some time to survey, but if we set well about it the work may be done once for all, so as to be a real step in our lives, the groundwork of a thorough conversion to God, in one

who has hitherto lived to himself, or of a solid building up of the spiritual man, in one who is already resting on Christ the Rock, with a hearty will to "do the things he has heard."

It is needful to prepare the will to renounce the occasions of sin, and the things that border on it and naturally lead to it. Not that we can avoid all temptations, since some of them lie in the very path of our duty. But we can avoid very many indulgences that border upon excess, needless communications that are likely to corrupt us, excessive and careless talking that is likely to lead to sinful words, reading what is likely to distract the mind, looking at what is likely to set the thoughts wrong, aiming at setting up ourselves, which is likely to breed strife, meddling with what we are tempted to covet, letting the mind dwell on that which breeds proud or angry or any other kind of evil thoughts. And great care must be taken to do justice to any good resolutions we may be led to make in these matters, and not wilfully to break them, whatever we may do through the natural infirmity of forgetfulness.

When once we have done our best to gather up the recollection of our past life, and to confess and renounce all the evil of it, and set ourselves upon a course of obedience to God's will, there will not be exactly the same work to do over again, but we must still expect to find very much wanting towards the perfect renewal of the

image of Christ in us. Sometimes it may be well to review a year, or some longer portion of our life, fully, in the way before mentioned, but the manner of doing it will be nearly the same. With respect to the continued examination of our present life, it is best for most people to set themselves chiefly to work in rooting out what they find to be their besetting sins, and to ask themselves daily whether they have in any respect fallen into these, and then deal with themselves strictly, and chastise and guard themselves where the fault is found. By thus following up the enemies of the Lord till we have destroyed them, the victory is made sure and lasting, for God's blessing rests upon a hearty and self-denying strife against sin. And this kind of close warfare may be carried on against lighter evils when the greater are subdued, and may be made the means of high advancement in the very virtues in which we are naturally most wanting. Many a good man has curbed a talkative tongue so as to glorify God by becoming eminent for guarded speech, and controlled a hasty temper, so as to become an example of meekness; and the same may be done with other things. Thus it is well at the beginning of Lent to have some one or two particular points marked out, in which we know that we greatly need improvement, and to keep them in view the whole time, losing no opportunity of pressing forward toward perfection.

Besides these works of assault against sin, there are others for which fasting and retirement make room, which tend greatly to our advancement in holiness. Such are prayer and meditation, and the thoughtful reading of Holy Scripture. Not to speak of these now at length, it may still be well to mention that in each of them we are likely to gain much ground by giving some time to them in such a season as this. Not only by giving on the whole rather more time than usual to such occupations, but by setting apart a space of time such as will allow the mind to gather up its whole strength into the work, and do it in a way that we have not thought of before. Thus we may remain in prayer not only till we have said our usual devotions, but till our souls have poured themselves out in fervent longing for increased holiness. We may wait for the power to exert ourselves thus in prayer, and pray that we may pray, and then again with renewed strength pray for holiness and victory over sin; over this and that sin, if so be, that besets us. Or we may fix beforehand on subjects for meditation, and then shut out every thing else while we dwell on them for a good long time, and return again to the same, or kindred subjects, and collect our thoughts at the end in an earnest movement of the will and affections toward God. Or again we may take a portion of Holy Scripture, such as the Sermon on the Mount, or the history of the passion of our Lord, or some of His Dis-

courses, or some of the Apostolical Epistles, or of the prophecies—all are fuller of Christ than any of us imagine till we have tried their richness—and live with it alone for sometime, making it our only reading, and our chief companion. Each of these things is what we can best do in a season of retirement from the world, when we shut out especially its pleasures, and everything approaching to that “fullness of bread” that makes man proud and thoughtless of spiritual things.

And the issue of our work should be in new ways of living, or at least in the amendment of our ways. Resolutions are not to be lightly made, for it is a very bad thing breaking them; but in such a time we have leisure to consider well what rules of life we really might follow so as to keep nearer to God, and to fix them at least for a temporary trial if they are only what we judge may do good, or to be kept as long as we live if we are fully assured that such is our duty. Let every thing be well considered, before we venture on such a step, and except in the very clearest cases let a spiritual guide be consulted. But whether we come to formal resolutions or not, our keeping of Lent should issue in acts of the *will*, and should leave us *doing* better than it found us; and it will do so, if we search with a true heart, and a firm purpose to set right what we find to be wrong.

Forty days of deliberate, settled self-denial,

will seem hard to flesh and blood, but as we have to eat bread in the sweat of our brow, so have we to labour and strive in our spiritual life. David, after his holy childhood and youth, was still a penitent. God led him through a life of severe trial, and let him know what there was in his heart, and even by his sins purged and humbled him. And so, with the labour of true penitence, may even our past faults be turned into means of perfection, though if neglected they are certainly our loss, and may be our ruin.

Let us not be afraid to condemn sin in ourselves, but hate it with a perfect hatred, for it is God's enemy and the enemy of our own life. It is as much worse than any outward enemy as Judas was worse than the soldiers of the band, and is like him for whom it had been better that he had never been born. Now is the time for searching and trying and casting it out, and filling its place with ways and thoughts of holiness. If we walk after the Spirit, the Law is not meant to condemn us; yet it is good if we use it lawfully, and we may well use it in finding out what is evil in ourselves, provided we always remember that we are not under the Law, but under grace. If even the Jew, who could not obey, could delight in the law of God after the inward man, much more may we, who have the grace of the Spirit, make it our delight to meditate therein, and to see the wonderful things which God there shews to His own. If we can-

not do this without pain to ourselves, it is only a sign that we have much to amend, and that the labour is well worth our while. If the thing is strange and new to us, and we hardly see how to set about it, the more reason is there for doing what we can. No one expects to be able to do anything useful and effective in the works of this world till after several trials. If we can do but little, the more reason for not losing that little; for he who can do little in Lent, can most likely do but little at any time, and so very little will be done while he lives, if the best time is lost.

Whatever it is that hinders you from attempting something real and solid is certainly a vain excuse. If (whether from choice or poverty) the diet is already through the year as low as health allows, and all unnecessary amusements and pleasures put away, then let care be taken that the spiritual work of the season is done in its due time, and kept to its due character, for there is a time for all things. Easter will be for the joy of the Resurrection, the time just before it for the sorrows and consolations of the Passion of our blessed Lord, and surely the time before that should serve for some sort of judgment, examination, and discipline of our own selves.

Wm. M. Wright,
DESPATCH PRINTING AND PUBLISHING OFFICE,
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