

What is Lent and Should Christians Observe It?

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What is Lent?

Lent is a tradition observed by Catholics, Lutherans, and Anglicans, and some Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. It is observed from Ash Wednesday to Easter.

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent and is based on the OT practice of using ashes as signs of penitence and mourning. Centuries ago Roman Catholics who fell into serious sin became part of an “order of penitents” to prepare themselves to be reconciled with the Church in Holy Week and thus be prepared for Holy Communion. Today on Ash Wednesday ashes are sprinkled on people’s foreheads as a sign of mortality while the priest/officiant says, “dust you are, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19).

Lent’s purpose is to prepare one (through prayer, repentance, almsgiving, and self-denial) for “Holy Week” that recalls Christ’s death and resurrection. This is not an optional activity for Roman Catholics: they are required to observe this, including abstaining from meat and fasting on Ash Wednesday (Code of Canon Law, 1249–1253).

Their “biblical basis” is found in Jesus’ 40 days of fasting in the desert before his public ministry began. “By the solemn forty days of *Lent* the Church unites herself each year to the

mystery of Jesus in the desert” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 138).

The Meaning of Lent. At first the Latin term for 40 (*quadragesima*) was used. As English began to be used in Catholic sermons during the Middle Ages, the word *lent* was adopted. At first *lent* meant *spring* (German: *Lenz*, Dutch: *lente*). It comes from the Germanic root for *long* because in spring the days are longer.

Why is Lent Observed? The Roman Catholic Church says that fasting during Lent must be observed so that spiritual life is “guaranteed” in “the faithful” (*Catechism*, p. 493). By keeping these “holy days of obligation” Catholics “honor the mysteries of the Lord, the Virgin Mary, and the saints” (*Catechism*, p. 494). This is a “means of obtaining forgiveness of sins” (*Catechism*, p. 360).

Lent is observed to honor Mary—“In celebrating this annual cycle of the mysteries of Christ, Holy Church honors the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, with a special love. She is inseparably linked with the saving work of her Son” (*Catechism*, p. 303).

What Else is Observed During Lent? Lent is preceded by a festival (Mardi Gras, Shrove Tuesday, or Fat Tuesday) that gives one last opportunity for excess. The 40 days of Lent are marked by fasting from

food and activities and other acts of penance. Some people give up a vice or add something that will bring them closer to God.

Did the Protestant Reformers Observe Lent? The Reformers rejected Lent, seeing it as the difference between the sacramentalism of Catholicism and the Scriptural foundation of “faith alone” (*sola fide*). One of the Reformers, Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), and some of his followers publicly and purposely violated the Lenten fast by eating smoked sausages.

Should Christians Observe Lent?

We must first consider *what is a Christian?* A Christian is a sinner who is saved solely by God’s grace through Jesus Christ, not by any human works or merit. Salvation is received by *repenting* from dead works and all attempts to be saved by self-righteousness, and by *exclusive faith* in Jesus Christ—the knowledge of, assent to, and unreserved trust in the person and work of Christ. A Christian is a believer whose salvation is *evidenced* by holiness and good works, not *gained* or *maintained* by such.

Lent is a Catholic rite, and its purposes are to guarantee spiritual life, honor Jesus Christ and Mary, and obtain forgiveness of sins.

The various customs associated with Lent are entirely works of self-

righteousness by which one tries to get right with and closer to God. God says in Scripture, however, that works can never gain forgiveness of sins (Gal 2:16), and that such have no place in the Christian’s life (Gal 3:3). “All our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment” (Isa 64:6; Phil 3:9)

Conclusion

Christians should **not** observe Lent – it is a distinctly Catholic ritual, believed to be essential for salvation and forgiveness of sins. Depending on your works will never bring you closer to God. Rituals are substituted for the real thing—the righteousness of Christ. Additionally, we are warned against making some days more important than others (Gal 4:9–10; Col 2:8, 16). Observing Lent in reality an exercise in hypocrisy—before and after Lent adherents can literally live like the Devil, but during Lent the same feign holiness by outward efforts of self-denial.

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Sunday Services:
Morning worship—10:30 a.m.
Fellowship lunch—12:00 p.m.
Afternoon service—1:00 p.m.

Wednesday Prayer Meeting, 7:00 p.m.

All services at the Windsor Community Center, on Route 322 ½ mile west of 534