

As God's People, we are called upon to fast

- ✧ in secret, not revealing to others what we are doing, in obedience to the Lord's specific command not to judge the practices of others; and
- ✧ joyfully, knowing that the aim of fasting is not the fasting itself but rather the acquisition of the Holy Spirit.

JOYFUL SEASONS

Thus, for Orthodox Christians, fasting seasons are joyful seasons. They are not times for remorse, but for repentance. They are not occasions for mere "breast-beating" or, worse yet, for ritualistic but meaningless acts of penitence; rather they remind us of the need for real personal, internal change. In regard to fasting, they are not simply inducements to change our diets, but rather to change our words, actions, and thoughts from those which are evil and inspired by Satan to those which are good and inspired by God.

Thus we sing as we begin the season of Great Lent—the period of greatest fasting which prepares us for the period of greatest celebration:

Let us begin the most precious Fast with joy,

Shining with the holy commandments of Christ our God,

With the splendor of love,

With the brilliance of prayer,

With the cleanness of purity,

With the strength of blessed courage....,

Fasting from foods and not fasting from passions....,

The true fast is the alienation of evils,

The bridling of the tongue,

The laying aside of anger,

The cutting off of lust, foolish talking, lies and cursing....,

The disappearance of these is a fast true and acceptable.

These verses, chanted in the first Monday Matins service of Great Lent, reveal the goal and purpose of fasting. We wash our faces. We anoint our heads. We look only to ourselves and to our God. We hide our efforts. We change our lives. We rejoice with delight in our search for God.

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FASTING





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Christ fasted and in the process He taught us, His people, to fast as well. In the *Sermon on the Mount* He said:

And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:16-18).

WHEN YOU FAST

Christ did not say “if you fast” but rather, “when you fast.” He presupposed that we understand fasting as a necessary part of our spiritual lives.

Christ Himself fasted. We know, for example, that He fasted for forty days after His baptism, thereby preparing Himself before making His appearance to the people and beginning His public ministry.

We know also how, when His disciples could not heal a suffering child, Christ upbraided them with the words:

But this kind (of demon) never comes out except by prayer and fasting (Matthew 17:21).

The people of the Old Testament fasted as well. Centuries before the coming of Christ, the prophet Isaiah wrote the following:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn... (Isaiah 58:6-8).

The apostles also fasted. They connected their fasting with prayer as Christ taught. They did not separate their fasting from faith and good works rendered in obedience to God’s commandments of mercy and love. As the apostles continued in prayer and fasting, they likewise commanded us to do so as well.

A NECESSARY ELEMENT

Fasting, then, is an essential element of the spiritual life which

- ✧ frees us from the passions;
- ✧ enables us to gain dominion over our lives; and
- ✧ enables the Spirit of God to dwell within us and make us instruments of His will.

Fasting is not at all an act of mortification for mortification’s sake. It is not a “little suffering” which is somehow pleasing to

God. It is not a “punishment” which is to be sorrowfully endured in payment for sins. It is not given to us in the context of “laws” which, if endured, gain us favor in the sight of God while, if ignored, render us sinful and guilty.

The sin of not fasting is found in our failure to employ a practice which is absolutely necessary in our struggle to overcome sin and to enter into communion with God.

SEASONS OF FASTING

The Church reserves certain seasons and days for fasting. These are times when we are mobilized in our struggle against evil, armed in prayerful, vigilant expectancy for the coming of God. We are called to fast in preparation for eucharistic services and during the seasons which prepare us for the celebration of the great festivals of the Lord’s presence and power among His People.

During these times, God’s People fast as a community; yet within the community each person fasts differently, according to his or her own personal abilities and capabilities.

The essential point during these times and seasons is that all should fast, at least minimally.