

Great Lent: Our Journey to Meet Our Heavenly Bridegroom

Excerpts about fasting from the teachings of St. John Chrysostom:

When the fast makes its appearance, like a kind of spiritual summer, let us as soldiers burnish our weapons, and as harvesters sharpen our sickles, and as sailors order our thoughts against the waves of extravagant desires, and as travelers set out on the journey towards heaven, and as wrestlers prepare for the contest. For the believer is at once a harvester and a sailor and a soldier, a wrestler and a traveler.

Sharpen your sword and your sickle, which has been blunted by gluttony, sharpen it by fasting. Lay hold of the pathway, which leads towards heaven, rugged and narrow as it is. Lay hold of it, and journey on.

I speak not of such a fast as most persons keep, but of real fasting, not merely abstinence from meats, but from sins as well. For the nature of fast is such that it does not suffice to deliver those who practice it unless it is done according to a suitable law. So that when we have gone through the labor of fasting, we do not lose the crown of fasting; we must understand how and in what manner it is necessary to conduct the business since the Pharisee also fasted, but afterward went away empty and destitute of the fruit of fasting. The Publican did not fast, and yet he was accepted in preference of him who had fasted in order that we may learn that fasting is unprofitable unless all other duties accompany it.

Fasting is like medicine. But like all medicines, though it be very profitable to the person who knows how to use it, it frequently becomes useless, and even harmful, in the hands of him who is unskillful in its use.

I have said these things, not that we may disparage fasting, but that we may honor fasting. For the honor of fasting consists not in abstinence from food, but in withdrawing from sinful practices, since he who limits his fasting only to abstaining from meat is one especially who disparages fasting.

Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works. By what kind of works? If you see a poor man, take pity on him. If you see an enemy, be reconciled with him. If you see a friend gaining honor, do not be jealous of him. If you see a beautiful woman, pass her by. And let not only the mouth fast, but also the eye and the ear and the feet and the hands and all members of your bodies.

Let the hands fast being pure from plundering and avarice. Let the feet fast by stopping them from running to unlawful situations. Let the eyes fast, being taught never to fix themselves rudely on handsome faces, or busying themselves with strange beauties. For looking is the food of the eyes, but if it were such as is unlawful or forbidden, it mars the fast and upsets the whole safety of the soul. But if it were lawful and safe, it adorns fasting. For it would be among the things most absurd to abstain from lawful food because of the fast, but with eyes to touch even what is forbidden!

Do you not eat meat? Feed not upon lasciviousness by means of your eyes! Let the ear fast also. The fasting of ear consists in refusing to receive evil speaking and calumnies.

Let the mouth also fast from disgraceful speeches and railings. For what does it profit if we abstain from fish and poultry and yet bite and devour the flesh of our brothers and sisters? The evil speaker eats the flesh of his brother and bites the body of his neighbor. Because of this, St. Paul utters the fearful saying, "If you bite and devour one another, take heed that you are not consumed by one another" (Gal. 5:15). You have not fixed your teeth in his flesh, but you have fixed slander in his soul and inflicted the wound of evil suspicion, and you have harmed in a thousand ways yourself and him and many others, for slandering your neighbor you have made him who listens to the slander worse, for should he be a wicked person, he becomes more careless when he finds a partner in his wickedness. And should he be a just person, he is tempted to arrogance and gets puffed up, being led on by the sin of others to imagining great things concerning himself. Besides this, you have struck at the common welfare of the Church herself, for all those who hear you will not only accuse the supposed sinner, but the entire Christian community.

As so I desire to fix three precepts in your mind so that you may accomplish them during the fast: (1) to speak ill of no one, (2) to hold no one for an enemy, and (3) to expel from your mouth altogether the evil habit of swearing.

For if, as the harvester in the fields comes to the end of his labors little by little, so we also if we make this rule of ourselves and in any manner come to the correct practice of these three precepts during the present Lent and commit them to the safe custody of good habit, we shall proceed with greater ease to the rest, and by this means attain to the summit of spiritual wisdom. And we shall reap the harvest of a favorable hope in this life, and in the life to come we shall stand before Christ with great confidence and enjoy those unspeakable blessings of which, God grant, we may all be found worthy through the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord, with whom be glory to the Father and to the Holy Spirit unto the ages of all ages. Amen.

* The above is taken from St. John Chrysostom's "Concerning the Statues", Homily 3.