

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this morning's Epistle reading, we heard St. Paul quoting some of the prophets. He said:

“Brethren, you are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Therefore, come out from them, and be separate from them,” says the Lord, “and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters,” says the Lord Almighty.”

Then St. Paul gives us directions as to how to live. He said: "Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God."

St. John Chrysostom tells us that St. Paul means: “By holiness he means not chastity alone, but the freedom from every kind of sin, for he is holy that is pure. Now one will become pure, if he is not free from fornication only, but if from covetousness also, and envy, and pride, and vainglory, yes especially from vainglory which in every thing indeed it is expected for us to avoid.”

God has promised us, that if we separate ourselves from the wicked world, He will be a Father to all of us. What a great inheritance we have been promised. Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of flesh and spirit. We must shun intimate involvement with the world.

Every year, at this time, the church provides us 40 days of intense prayer and fasting to help us separate ourselves from the wicked world. In order to help us to resist the temptations of the world we are called to fast.

What is meant by the word ‘fast’? To many people, it means not eating certain foods such as meat, poultry, and dairy products as well as not drinking alcoholic beverages. But it also means that we must reduce the amount of food that we eat. The Church Fathers gave us a guiding principle to help us in our fasting: we should never eat until we are full, but always rise from the table feeling that we could have taken more.

This is the outward level of fasting. In order to enter into the inward level of fasting we need to keep this outward level of fasting. This outward level of fasting should never be treated as an end in itself, for this ascetical fasting also has an inward and unseen purpose. Man is a unity of body and soul, "a living creature fashioned from natures visible and invisible". Our ascetic fasting should therefore involve both these natures at once. For some there is a tendency to over emphasize external rules about food in a legalistic way. For others, there is the opposite tendency to scorn these rules as outdated and unnecessary. Both are to be deplored as a betrayal of true Orthodoxy. In both cases the proper balance between the outward and the inward has been impaired.

Metropolitan Kallistos Ware tells us "The primary aim of fasting is to make us conscious of our dependence upon God. If practiced seriously, the Lenten abstinence from food involves considerable measure of real hunger, and also a feeling of tiredness and physical exhaustion. The purpose of this is to lead us in turn to a sense of inward brokenness and contrition; to bring us, to the point where we appreciate the full force of Christ's statement, "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Metropolitan Kallistos continues "Yet it would be misleading to speak only of this element of weariness and hunger. Abstinence leads, not merely to this, but also to a sense of lightness, wakefulness, freedom and joy".

As it is important not to overlook the physical aspect of fasting, it is even more important not to overlook the inner aspect of fasting. True fasting is to be converted in heart and will. It is to return to God. St. John Chrysostom tells us that true fasting means "abstinence not only from food but from sins. The fast should be kept not by the mouth alone but also by the eye, the ear, the feet, the hands and all the members of the body". The eye must abstain from impure sights, the ear from malicious gossip, the hands from acts of injustice. St. Basil tells us that it is useless to fast from food and yet to indulge in the cruel criticism of slander.

The prayers from the first week of Great Lent, emphasize this point.

From the vespers of this week we hear:

Let us observe a fast acceptable and pleasing to the Lord.

True fasting is to put away all evil,

To control the tongue, to forbear from anger,

To abstain from lust, slander, falsehood and perjury.

If we renounce these things, then is our fasting true and acceptable to God.

Let's keep the Fast not only by refraining from food,

But by becoming strangers to all the bodily passions.

St. Silouan the Athonite tells us "the man who wrestles with wrong thoughts loves God according to his measure.

He struggles against sin, and asks God to give him strength not to sin, but falls into sin again because of his infirmity, and sorrows and repents - he possesses grace in the depths of his soul and mind, but his passions are not yet overcome.

But the man who has conquered his passions now knows no conflict: all his concern is to watch himself in all things lest he fall into sin.

Grace, great perceptible, is his. But he who feels grace in both soul and body is a perfect man, and if he preserves this grace, his body is sanctified and his bones will make holy relics.

St. Isaiah the Solitary tells us that "Bodily fasting alone is not enough to bring about self-restraint and true purity;

it must be accompanied by contrition of heart, intense prayer to God, frequent meditation on the Scriptures, toil, and manual labor.

These are able to check the restless impulses of the soul and to recall it from its shameful fantasies.

Humility of soul helps more than anything else, however, and without it no one can overcome unchastity or any other sin.

In the first place, then, we must take the utmost care to guard the heart from base thoughts, for, according to the Lord, "Indeed, it is from the heart that evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual sins, thefts, false witness, and blasphemies come forth." (Matthew 15:19).

Another important aspect of fasting is prayer. Fasting is valueless and possibly even harmful if it is not combined with prayer. Divorced from prayer and from reception of the holy sacraments, unaccompanied by acts of compassion, our fasting becomes pharisaical or even demonic. It leads not to contrition or joyfulness, but to pride, inward tension and irritability.

In the Gospel we read the devil is cast out, not by fasting alone, but by prayer and fasting. In the Book of Acts we read that before the apostles and the other Christians did any major work for God, they prayed and fasted.

Prayer and fasting should be accompanied by almsgiving. We must have love for others expressed in practical form, by works of compassion and forgiveness. We must do as the Lord commanded. We must feed the hungry. We must give the thirsty drink. We must clothe the naked. We must welcome strangers. We must visit those in prison and the sick.

From the writings of the church fathers in the second century we read from the Shepherd of Hermas writes that money saved through fasting is to be given to the widow, the orphan, and the poor. Giving means more than only giving our possessions. It is to give not only our money but our time, not only what we have but what we are; it is to give a part of ourselves.

Again from Vespers during the first week of the fast:

while fasting the body, brethren, let us also fast in spirit.
Let us lose every bond of inequity;
let us undo the knot of every contract made by violence;
let us tear up unjust agreements;
let us give bread to the hungry;
and welcome to our house the poor who have no roof to cover them,
that we may receive mercy from Christ our God.

Let this journey to Pascha, be a time of examining at our lives. Have the passions within us been overcome? Have they become strangers to us? Have we separated ourselves from the sinfulness

of this world? Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God. Let the coming fast guide us, as children of God, to theosis. Let us be temples of the living God and God will be a father to us, and we shall be His sons and daughters. Let us always remember what St. Paul said “The one who does not eat should not judge the one who eats.”

Let us also always remember, we are called to fast to the best of our abilities. If we have an illness that prevents us from fasting from food, it does not keep us from fasting from sin. Let us also increase our prayers and almsgiving.