



The Conditions of True Christian Fasting

Great Lent is approaching. The seven weeks of the holy fast that stand on the threshold of the great feast in the glory of Christ the Savior are, in the words of the holy teachers of the Church, a ladder by which Christians must ascend to spiritual perfection. Those who have been able successfully to gain a firm foothold on this ladder are able to accept into themselves the gifts of the Holy Spirit and to contemplate the great mystery of Christ's Resurrection.

What then should our fast be like that it may be pleasing to God and salutary to our souls? There is no need to philosophize when responding to this question. The required qualities of fasting are indicated in the present Gospel reading.

The first condition of our Christian fast is gentleness of soul. The consolations of true fasting are not accessible to one who is proud, irascible, and obstinate. When our souls are overwhelmed by evil memories and unkindness, when our hearts are restlessly made anxious by feelings of anger, revenge, and hatred, then we are not fasting. A person in this condition, even if his mouth is repeating the words of prayer and his ears are listening to the Church's hymns, is not atoning for his sins, but rather adding to them. A person in this condition is a slave to the passions. True fasting, however, arouses the most pure and noble feelings of love in the soul. One soberly and mindfully holds before one's consciousness the greatness of the goal to which one is directing one's soul. The attainment of this goal furnishes one with the greatest qualities of love. One who wishes to spend Great Lent properly must not forget for a minute the necessity of being meek. The first garment of Christian fasting is meekness and amenability. The ability to restrain oneself from angry outbursts, the ability to distance oneself from envy and rivalry, the skill of generously foregoing one's rights – this is the first God-pleasing foundation of Christian fasting.



Archpriest Valentine Amphiteatrov

Continuing along the same lines, during Lent a Christian should develop yet another valuable and virtuous quality: forbearance. While we forget our own personal shortcomings, we are often severe and harsh towards human mistakes and misconduct. We humiliate another's personhood through bitter words and disdainful looks. This is the very sin that destroys love in our souls. Good is he who during the days of the fast succeeds in breaking down and destroying this sin in himself, replacing it with benevolence, friendly helpfulness, and other pure and honest properties of Divine love. Thus, the principle and primary condition of fasting is the acquisition of love for one another. The loving soul, illumined by the light of grace, becomes adorned with the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The second condition of Christian fasting is shown in the following words of Jesus Christ Himself: *Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast* (Matthew 6:16). Hypocrites follow the rules of fasting only to be seen by people; they do not fast for God. They want others to think of them as fasters, and do not use the fast to dispose their souls towards good deeds and to pleasing God. Hypocritical fasting is an offence against God that turns His loving and just eyes away from man.

True fasting should be undertaken for God, that is, in order to cleanse the soul from sins, disposing it towards the good through spiritual and bodily struggles. Such spiritual activity is obviously more difficult than hypocritical bodily abstinence. Here one is in constant contact with one's conscience. The conscience continuously reminds one of humility and contrition of heart. It continuously shows the soul in all its



unattractive conditions to our consciousness. When an ill person sees tangible sores on his body, he obviously grieves deeply. He hides this pestilence and shows it to no one, in order to flatter his self-love. Thus is the recognition of spiritual imperfection also the first step towards making an effort to correct it.

The third condition of Christian fasting, according to the teachings of the Gospel, is the constant mental appeal to the heavenly bliss acquired for us by Jesus Christ. According to the teachings of the Holy Church, we should constantly pray and think about how to acquire the Kingdom of Heaven. We were Baptized in the font as infants so that we would enter this Kingdom. We were led to Christ's Chalice for this alone. In short, our prayer – both corporate and private – is a petition for this Kingdom.

But most often our lives clearly go against this desire. In this case a strange and inexplicable disagreement with one's own self arises. This is owing to a simple reason: many of us conceive of heavenly goods – and spiritual enjoyment in general – unclearly, weakly, and vaguely. And yet this conception of the heavenly and pure is what comprises man's true blessedness, the true source of living water about which Jesus Christ once spoke with the Samaritan woman (cf. John 4). We, who are accustomed to take into account only our present reality, are like people who quench their thirst with murky and putrid water. Yet behind this satisfaction stand quietly the weakening and breaking down of one's strength. The human soul cannot be satisfied by the present, the limited, and the sensory. It requires not temporal blessedness, but eternal blessedness. When we love truly, we want to love not for a short time, but forever and ever – eternally. Temporary possession is egoism, a feeling unworthy of man and nothing but the animal delight of the senses.

When we look at the sky, at the rushing water in spring, at a beautiful prairie, or at a stirring forest, what we experience in our souls is not so much joy as longing. The soul, looking for and striving towards something that is clothed in our thoughts and memories, aches and grows faint. When we hear a howling storm, a thunderbolt, singing, or music we experience the same thing: a combination of both joy and sadness. Are there not a few examples of how people weep when hearing the most beautiful and delightful singing? Just what does all this mean? This means that when our immortal spirit – confined to the passionate flesh, enclosed in disorder, vanity, and ugliness – then hears the graceful voice of its fatherland and sees, however unclearly, the indescribable beauty of heavenly blessedness, it remembers its imperishable and eternal paradise. Therefore, the best and most elevated enjoyments of our senses are a clear indication of heavenly enjoyment. We should look at all sensory enjoyments in this way: they are akin to eternal blessedness and everlasting joy; they are direct or indirect reminders of it, bidding us to our precious fatherland. Let each of us consider it essential to strive for these sublime spiritual enjoyments. In them, and only in them, are heaven, and eternity, and paradise, and people themselves like angels. These enjoyments are pure and sacred; they reassure us in the middle of the shadow of death; they offer us our longed-for fatherland, making us once again the inhabitants of paradise. Therefore the Savior warns us in the Gospel reading you have heard: *Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal* (Matthew 6:19).

This is the lesson that our mother, the Church, gives us on this day of our parting with sins and vanities. Let us not be distracted and lazy pupils. This lesson is of the utmost importance for those who wish to fast. Amen.

Translated from [Russian](#).



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