



The Fast: Ten Beneficial and Ten Harmful Things

What is important for us to bear in mind during the fast?

The fast, by definition, is a time of abstinence. Therefore, let us strive to abstain from everything that is unprofitable for our souls:



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1. Television. It seems to me that television is first on the list of unprofitable things. Television shows compel viewers to squander a part of their lives “for someone else.” There was a case of a mother who refused to emigrate to be with her children because the country to which they had invited her had stopped showing “Santa Barbara.” When it comes time to say that television viewing should be limited during the fast, you will hear that people are ready to give up watching the news and to fast very strictly with regard to food, but they cannot give up watching television shows.

It is precisely this harmful obsession – one that teaches us to live an imaginary life and to sympathize with vice and passion, as dictated by directors and screenwriters – that we need to give up, at least during the fast. I also advise watching fewer movies: nearly everything said about television can be applied to the average film. The news is also unlikely to bring a calm and prayerful disposition to someone who is fasting. Therefore, if you have not yet disconnected the antenna from your television, now is the time to do so.

2. Unlimited cell phone service. Unless your work requires you to have unlimited phone service, it would be better to give it up during the fast. Unlimited communication is very unprofitable during the time the Church has allocated for prayer and spiritual reading; it greatly weakens the soul. Let us also be careful with our land line phones.



3. The Internet. The best thing is to draw up a precise list of websites that you can visit during the fast. Everything not related to work or obedience should be strictly regulated. Even a familiar website that is completely innocuous at regular times might provide information that is unprofitable during the fast. Therefore, before you follow a link, give some thought to what the consequences will be for your soul that is fasting.

4. Personal communication. It goes without saying that someone fasting should not put his abstinence on display. Nonetheless, it is very important for the sake of spiritual benefit to limit communication. This should be done carefully, so as not to offend anyone by our refusal. Sometimes it is necessary for the sake of a neighbor to neglect our silence. Sometimes our engagement can save a neighbor's soul, or even his life. However, gossip, tittle-tattling, and empty chatter can cause harm not only to the person who is fasting, but also to those around him. Let us be careful with our words, those double-edged swords capable of both healing and destroying.

5. Excessive rest. Just as immoderate labor is bad for one's health, and even for one's soul, so too is excessive rest permissible only for the ill. By resting excessively during a fasting period we deprive ourselves of the benefits of spiritual struggle.

6. Other amusements. Here it is extremely important to determine for oneself what is and is not acceptable during this time, when the soul is like a bee gathering honey. Just as a bee labors during flowering season, so should someone who is fasting not be distracted by anything that interferes with the primary purpose of the fast. This applies to music, games, the celebration of various anniversaries, and much else. Nevertheless, all things in moderation: your guests will be puzzled if a celebration turns into an edifying conversation over dry cabbage.

7. Travel. One can welcome going on pilgrimage, but even this needs to be done within limits. It is better yet to spend the fast in the quiet of one's own home if possible. One cannot always postpone a vacation to a holiday spot, but in that case one needs to remember that one has already broken the fast to some extent. Therefore, in such cases it is important to decide on one's priorities. After all, children sometimes need a break from the city. Moreover, vacation schedules do not always depend on us.

8. Food. Someone who is fasting should know what he is capable of abstaining from during the fast, so that he will not undermine his health. Meat, of course, should be permitted only to those with a serious illness; as for everyone else, their fasting should be within reason. A steelworker should not give up milk, just as a student should not give up fish. The many church calendars that include the monastic rules of fasting are not, generally speaking, suitable for the laity. It is more important to give up foods that feed the passions than those that feed the body: for example, sweets and gourmet foods are more harmful to the soul than a glass of milk is to someone who engages in a great deal of physical labor. Abstinence from food is nothing more than a mean towards maintaining soul and body in a disciplined state – it is not an end in itself. This is extremely important. Therefore, if you are invited to be someone's guest, there is no point traumatizing your hosts with your display of abstinence. It would be better to increase the strictness of your fasting later, so that the fast might be profitable to your soul and body without alienating non-church-goers from Orthodoxy.

9. Alcohol. It should be borne in mind that any amount of alcohol consumed during the fast should be considered to some degree non-fasting, since any alcoholic drink weakens the soul to a greater or lesser



extent, rendering it incapable of the labors of the fast. Wine is permissible only on feast days, and even then strictly in moderation.

10. Marital relations. Regardless of the wide-ranging discussions that have taken place in recent years regarding this question, I am certain that marital relations during the fast cannot but affect the quality of fasting. But in order to engage in such strictness of fasting, when spouses are abstinent for the entire fast – BY MUTUAL CONSENT and without harming their marriage – one has to acquire spiritual maturity. Therefore, in the given case it is important to act reasonably and prudently. The most important thing to remember is that, although you might be able to cook for one in a single pot, in the case of marital relations – and especially in bed – the question must be considered mutually. It is better to violate the fast than to inflict pain on one’s “second half” by refusing them.

Of course, abstinence is fine and good – but only if done for some purpose. Therefore, it is worth thinking not only about what one needs to give up, but more generally about what one should pay more attention to when fasting.

1. Prayer. Without any doubt, there is nothing more important during the fast than strengthened prayer. It is prayer and abstinence that strengthen faith; therefore, it would be good to add one or two canons or several additional prayers to one’s prayer rule. Reading the Psalter is very beneficial. We should also strengthen our prayer for our neighbors, since they are no less needful than we are – and sometimes more needful – of prayerful support.



2. Confession and Communion. Be sure to have Confession and Communion several times – or, at the very least, once – during the fast. Nothing is better for the discipline of the soul than having a thorough and sincere Confession; and nothing nourishes the soul as does the Bread of Life.

3. Acts of charity. St. Seraphim of Sarov tells us: “True fasting does not consist simply in exhausting the flesh, but in taking that very piece of bread you had wanted to eat yourself and giving it to a hungry person.” Therefore, diligently helping your neighbor should be an important part of the fast. Let us not forget that, by helping our neighbors, we are above all helping Christ Himself.

4. The Jesus Prayer. It is worth giving special attention to the Jesus Prayer. The Apostle exhorts us *to pray without ceasing* (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Although even outside the fast no small amount of time in a Christian’s life should be devoted to acquiring the Jesus Prayer, the best time for laboring in this field is the fast. By devoting all our free time to the Jesus Prayer, we will undoubtedly gain profit for our souls during the fast.

5. Spiritual Reading. One chapter of the Gospel and two chapters from the other books of the New



Testament should be required reading for everyone who is fasting. The Bible is an inexhaustible source of divine wisdom, a gift of God that should never be neglected. The neophyte should certainly consult a commentary at least once, to which he can return as questions arise. It is difficult to offer general advice about reading other spiritual literature, but, as a general rule, one could read the sayings of the Desert Fathers and the lives of saints, as well as the works of the Optina Elders, St. Ignatius (Brianchaninov), and St. Theophan the Recluse. Creating a list of books for everyone, however, would be difficult. It is important that spiritual literature be for edification, leading one to a state of spiritual vigor, and not for amusement.

7. Pilgrimage. This has already been mentioned above, but it is worth adding that disheartened souls in need of comfort and reinforcement would do well to have recourse to going on a pilgrimage.

8. Sleep. It is a marvelous thing to spend part of the night in prayer. But not everyone is capable of this. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that nighttime prayer harmonizes the condition of one's soul, bringing into it peace and tranquility and strengthening it in its fight against temptation.

9. Humility. Let us not forget that humility is not a matter of prideful self-derision. The recognition of our spiritual infirmity and our incapability of doing anything without God's help – and, consequently, of asking for God's blessing for every activity and of praying during these activities – should be the norm for Christians. Such a condition is the easiest to acquire during the fast.

10. Love. We live in a time when love has grown almost entirely cold. Therefore, let us ask the Lord for love towards everyone without exception. The Lord will, of course, send us this love – we simply need to learn how to accept it. By observing the rules above – and especially by recognizing our own unworthiness – we will gradually become vessels capable of holding the wine of God's love. But without love it will all come to nothing. A fast without love will bring us only harm.

That is everything I had wanted to say at the beginning of this fast. Times are not easy for either the Church as a whole or for each one of us Christians. Therefore, let us accept the duration of the Apostles' Fast that lies before us as a gift towards living in abstinence and spiritual perfection. *Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak* (Matthew 26:41).

Beloved brothers and sisters, I greet you with the beginning of the fast!

Translated from the [Russian](#).