

Fasting and Feasting: Balanced Diets, Balanced Souls

By Richard McCombs

The fruitfulness of our fasting depends on our mind and on our heart. Without the spirit of fasting, our external asceticism is barren soil. If we fast for the wrong reasons or in the wrong spirit, it can leave us worse off. However, when quickened by the right spirit, this soil yields a rich harvest.

Let us consider four aspects of the spirit of fasting. The chief of these is understanding the goal, and constantly intending and concentrating on that goal. The second is understanding the spiritual sickness of which we hope to be cured. The third is vigilant guarding of the heart against the traps that menace the faster. The sinful self resists its death, and does its utmost to corrupt our fasting, in order to make our last state worse than our first. The fourth and final aspect is an applied understanding of how the practice of fasting is part of a larger plan, and how it cooperates with other practices, most notably with feasting, its complement.

The Goal of Fasting

The goal of fasting is simple. We fast so that we may better love, know, reveal, and enjoy God. We yearn, or at least intend, to do all of these things fully, but we also fall short. We fast to fulfill this intention. We fast to affirm God. Our affirmation of God is not yet that perfect “yes” we desire it to be. But fasting is a sapling “yes” striving for fruition. We must always bear in mind this affirmation at the heart of fasting, lest we be seduced by the widespread caricature of Christianity as a religion of “no,” of negation and negativity practiced by sullen enemies of joy. Admittedly, there is negation in the practice of fasting. But this negation serves the affirmation of God, the greatest good and the fountain of all joy. Moreover, as we shall see, the ascetic denial of created goods is complemented in Orthodoxy by their affirmation in feasting.

The affirmation at the heart of fasting is not a secret that emerges only when all fasting is over. Rather, it permeates the whole range of the activities of fasting. St. Paul writes, “Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things” (Philippians 4:8). This teaching is one of the great spiritual laws. It bids us focus on God and on positive qualities like beauty and goodness, which manifest Him. The basis of this law is that everyone tends to become whatever he habitually thinks on. We imitate that on which we meditate. The subject of our attention draws us into itself.

It is crucial that even in fasting our focus be on the perfect good at which we aim, and not on the evils and partial goods that we deny. If our attention is fixed on the things that we deny, then our fast is in vain. Those evils and finite goods can steal our heart even as we renounce them, and mold our minds into images of themselves. We must also not focus on the act of denial with all its strain and hardship, for that focus would assimilate us into gloomy negation. As much as possible, the conscious affirmation of God as the goal must inform our fasting, so that we may realize the image of God in ourselves. We need affirmation in fasting because we cannot live without joy. Jesus bade us to anoint our heads when we fast. Surely He didn’t intend for us to only seem to be happy. He meant for us to actually be happy, to be anointed with joy. If we do not find this joy of fasting, we may seek substitutions or

compensations. We certainly will seek joy when we have none. This striving for lost joy can dangerously pervert the power of fasting. At its worst, this perversion is a demonic delight in our supposed power, which we try to express by fasting. This demonic delight is the seven more deadly spirits who replace the less malign demon of intemperance, when the house of the soul is swept clean by fasting but left empty of joy. We must abstain from proud delight in our fasting. But if we hang on doggedly to our regimen, and the only perceptible result of our abstaining is that we suffer, then we will have still not progressed towards our goal. Our suffering by itself cannot attach us to the dispenser of joy.

“But what if my fasting is not joyful? Asking me to enjoy my fast is absurd, since I can’t in my present state enjoy God by a simple act of the will. And if I could, then perhaps I would not need to fast at all.” I hear this questioning voice in myself, and the Scripture answers with the word “hope.” Hope is the joyful expectation of the promises of God. We can experience this joyful expectation anywhere, including while we fast and store up treasure for ourselves in heaven. This is not to say that when we fast we earn salvation. But by fasting we do contribute to it, and are thereby well placed to hope. If we believe in the promises of God, and in our God-given power to work out our salvation with God, then we can experience joy as we cooperate with Him. To the degree that we believe, and work, we will experience the joy of hope. We should also remember that there are other sources of joy in fasting. There is the peace that one feels when his passions and desires are quieted. And there is also the humble delight in the acquisition of new freedom.

The Spiritual Disease Which Fasting Helps Cure

Now that we see that fasting is primarily affirmative, we may turn to its negative aspect. The purpose of its denials is to free us from our bondage to finite things, which detract from our love of God. The Fathers called this freedom *apatheia*, which may be translated as “detachment.” This detachment is the immediate goal of fasting. Through detachment, with the clutter cleared, we can find deeper connection to God. From what do we free ourselves? From what do we detach? In essence, we free ourselves from qualities of the soul that have become harmful. The following way of categorizing the things from which fasting can free us is just one among many possible ways.

- (1) Inordinate desire for finite, created things. We desire earthly goods as if they were God, as if they were the source of our best happiness. We must stop desiring them thus, and desire them for what they are, and only to the degree that is compatible with seeking first the Kingdom of God.
- (2) Inordinate fear of finite, created things. We fear earthly things as if they included the worst evils that could happen to us. We must instead fear loss of God most, and only then earthly evils, to the extent that such fear is compatible with religious fear.
- (3) Definition of oneself primarily by relations to finite, created things, or one’s place in the world. We tend to define ourselves by our friends, families, jobs, abilities, and accomplishments. Instead we must define ourselves first as beings made in the image of God, intended to enjoy perfect fellowship with Him, and second as beings with relations to other creatures and created things

- (4) Delusion concerning one's power over finite, created things, and delight in this delusional power. We tend to overrate our power and accomplishments, and to forget that whatever power we have comes from God, and any success from that God-given power. Moreover, we desire to enjoy this delusional power. But we must learn to see ourselves as powerful only in God, and not to desire to see ourselves otherwise.

Guarding the Heart against the Subtle Enemies of Fasting

As we seek through fasting to free ourselves from these vices, the vices fight back. Pride is an especially devious opponent, and, this side of perfection, we cannot hope to be free of delusions suggested by pride. We must, however, do our best to know ourselves; for the path to perfection is partly a study of the self and its tricks. Let us consider the role of self-deception in the following snares.

- (1) The denial of the value of finite things. It is a serious error to hate created goods, or think that they are spiritually worthless. Christianity always affirms that finite, relative things have an important value. If this were not so, then there could have been neither an Incarnation nor icons, and we could not have been made in the image of God. Moreover, since this devaluation is a deep error contrary to human nature, we cannot sincerely believe it. It is a lie that we may tell ourselves, a self-deception. And a lie to oneself always has its cost, and can cause various illnesses in the soul. The root of this lie may be simply ignorant overzealousness. But it may represent an attempt to lighten the burden of fasting by a simplistic extremism. It is harder to give up valuable goods than worthless dross. And so we lie to ourselves to prepare to renounce what we really value. Or, having renounced some good, we may bitterly resent its loss, and lie to cover up that loss and its pain.
- (2) Halfheartedness. Despite the relative value of things, we must nonetheless be prepared to give them up completely. We may have to lose the world to gain God. If we live in constant anxiety that we will be called on to renounce this or that forever, then we are halfhearted. If we fast merely to get a little free of the world so as to enjoy it better, as a worldly wise man might fast so as to enjoy his epicurean feast all the more, then we are double-minded. If we attempt to bargain with God, or to appease Him as if He were an indulgent parent, or to trick Him as though He were an absent-minded ruler, then we are lukewarm fasters. Let us beware of deceiving ourselves with these shallow stratagems.
- (3) Pride. Fasting is difficult. And pride is the most obvious means of making fasting easier. If I make my success in fasting a matter of pride, then I can surely improve in abstention from bodily pleasures. But I will have cast out one demon only to be beset by seven more deadly ones. For the delight in my illusory power to prevail on my own in the spiritual warfare is a far worse evil than the base addiction to physical pleasure that it conquers.

Since this pride in our success in fasting can mask itself as a legitimate delight in accomplishment, it proves to be a formidable foe. Let us therefore distinguish three different bases for delight in spiritual success, only some of which are godly. The first basis for delight is pleasing God. If we reasonably believe that what we are doing is pleasing to God, then we may delight in this greatest of all approvals: Well

done, good and faithful servant. A second basis for delight is impressing our fellows. If impressing our fellows gives us pleasure because we reasonably esteem their ability to evaluate us—as we should esteem our confessors—then this pleasure is perhaps at least innocuous. But if we define ourselves by this esteem, and not by our relation to God, and if we seek this esteem so as to carve out for ourselves seats of honor within the world or the Church, then our delight in success has become prideful. A final basis for delight in success in fasting despises all other human opinion and basks alone, not in the approval of God, but in self-congratulation, as if the demonically proud self were God. Since this sort of pride does not make a display for other people, and may even hide its feats, it can easily be mistaken for humility, both by others and by the self-deceived faster himself. One remedy to this self-deception is to remember that we fast precisely because of our weakness, because we cannot make ourselves happy by our own efforts. We have no sure hold on the goods of the world, and so look elsewhere, to God, for succor. Hence, to turn success in fasting into a reason for boasting is comically to misread the sign of our utter weakness. One must laugh at this absurdity in oneself, for such laughter is a strong aid in putting down the stealthy insurrection of pride.

- (4) Resentment, which we may understand as aggravated pride. You may be familiar with the following sort of resentment. A man who is not helped in good time, and as he wishes, may eventually reach a perverse frame of mind in which he will decline what seems to him a late offer of assistance. He feels injured, he thinks he has been denied help that was due to him. And he wishes to punish, with the sight of his avoidable suffering, the man who tardily offers help. Indeed, the resentful man wishes to prove his superiority to the tardy helper by his continuing and self-afflicted suffering, by his willingness to suffer in the cause of justice. The man at the pool, who surprisingly would not answer Jesus that he wished to be healed, was perhaps on the road to this sort of resentment. For a man may also resent God for the evil in the world, and God's apparent indifference to it. Let us beware of wishing, with Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*, to "return our ticket."

The ways in which self-deception can pervert fasting can seem to rob the spiritual life of all peace and joy. Here is where we must recall the greater law of fasting, that our main focus is to be on God, our goal. This focus itself will protect us from deception, and reveal us to ourselves, so great is the power of the knowledge of God. But we must also reserve regular times for self-examination aided and enlightened by spiritual reading. Moreover, we need spiritual counselors or confessors, who can help us to see ourselves as we are.

The Relation of Fasting to Feasting within Orthodox Spiritual Practice

Fasting and detachment are incomplete, and must be complemented by feasting and reattachment. Reattachment is the lived reaffirmation of the finite created goods that we have renounced. For those goods are gifts of God, not to be despised, and symbols of Him, in which we must rejoice as in our God. Only with this reattachment does virtue become complete. With fasting and detachment, we realize that we have no claim on or right to finite goods, that our hold on them is so precarious that at any time we may die, and that even the whole world may fall back into nonexistence, if God does not maintain it. If we learn this in our very bones, then we are ready for feasting and reattachment. In reattachment, we find ourselves able to wonder at the world, which has lost for us its appearance of obviousness and of being our property. Surprise replaces the commonplace. We are astonished at the world, wonder at it,

delight in it as a gift, contemplate it as a symbol of God, understand it as an occasion for joyful gratitude toward its Maker.

Though in the Orthodox calendar fasting and feasting are not simultaneous, but follow one another, ideally detachment and reattachment should coexist as conditions of soul. The soul should always be in readiness to lose or renounce any finite good, or the whole world—with pain and sorrow, yes, but without disproportionate disturbance. And the soul should also preserve always a readiness instantly to delight in any finite good as a gift of God and symbol of Him. In the midst of the greatest joy, the balanced soul remembers that it will die and lose this world. And in the midst of all loss and renunciation, that soul likewise delights in whatever finite good remains at hand. Such is the flexibility of soul for which we strive in the strictures of fasting, and in the expansions of feasting.

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