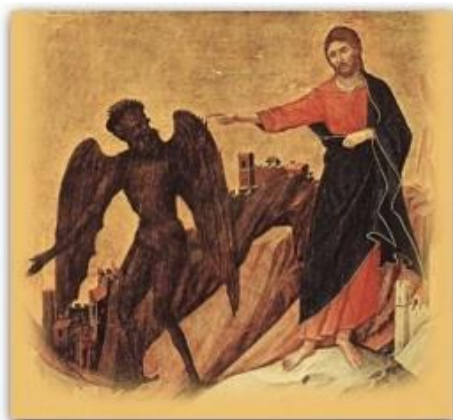


There are essentially 5 reasons for Orthodox Christians to practice the discipline of fasting

I.) First and foremost, Christians are to practice the discipline of fasting because our Lord Jesus fasted and commanded us to fast.

Matthew 4:1-11 and its parallel in Luke 4:1-13: Fasting as a discipline and gift of the Spirit. Note that Jesus is "led" by the Spirit into the desert in order to fast in the Gospel of Matthew; and, even more strongly, "driven" to do so by the Spirit in Luke. Also, with Matthew 4:4 fasting is seen by the Lord Jesus as a sign of dependence on God, on God's priority in one's life. Note also the "40 days and 40 nights" of fasting by the Lord Jesus as the model for the development of Great Lent as a season of fasting and intense spiritual discipline, a "tithe of the year" to quote St. Dorotheos of Gaza.

The Temptation of Jesus



¹Then **Jesus was led by the Spirit** into the desert to be tempted by the devil. ²After **fasting forty days and forty nights**, he was hungry. ³The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." ⁴Jesus answered, "It is written: **'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'** (*Deuteronomy 8:3*)."

⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶"If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: " 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone' (*Psalms 91:11-12*)."⁷Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test' (*Deuteronomy 6:16*)."

⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ⁹"All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'(*Deuteronomy 6:13*)."

¹¹Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Matthew 6:16-18, from the Sermon on the Mount, outlines the most appropriate spiritual attitude while fasting in order to avoid hypocrisy: not seeking to be noticed by others. Also, notice that the Lord says, "When you fast..." and not "If you fast..." – the Lord Jesus does not regard fasting as an option for His disciples.

Jesus' Teaching About Fasting

¹⁶"**When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do**, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Matthew 9:14-15: the Lord Jesus here teaches that fasting is an eschatological sign among His people: following His leaving this world and ascension into heaven forty days after His resurrection from the dead, it is a sign that we, as His disciples, are waiting for His Second Coming.

Jesus Questioned About Fasting

¹⁴Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" ¹⁵Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come **when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.**



Mark 9:14-29: Fasting as a discipline necessary for the appropriation of spiritual power in dealing with demonic forces, both in others and within one self.

The Healing of a Boy with an Evil Spirit

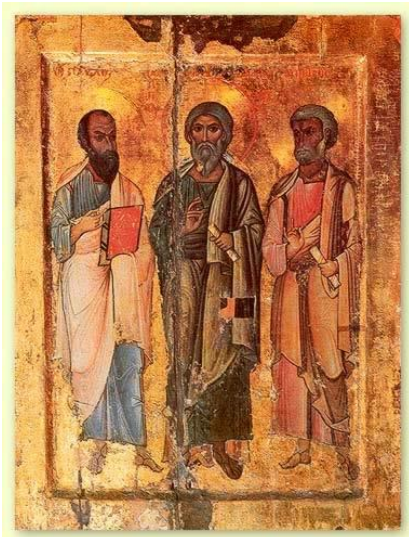
¹⁴When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. ¹⁵As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. ¹⁶"What are you arguing with them about?" Jesus asked. ¹⁷A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. ¹⁸Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

¹⁹"O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me." ²⁰So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. ²¹Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From

childhood," he answered. ²²"It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." ²³" 'If you can'?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes." ²⁴Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

²⁵When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil^[a] spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." ²⁶The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." ²⁷But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. ²⁸After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" ²⁹He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting."

2.) Christians are to fast because the apostles and earliest Christian churches practiced this discipline in order to open themselves to the direction of the Holy Spirit, connecting fasting with worship and ordination for ministry in the Church.



Acts 13:1-3

¹ Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. ² While **they were worshipping the Lord and fasting**, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

Acts 14: 21-23

²¹ They preached the gospel in Antioch of Syria and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, ²² strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. ²³ **Paul and Barnabas appointed presbyters (elders) for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord**, in whom they had put their trust.

3.) Christians fast in order to begin the return to Paradise by practicing a non-violent lifestyle – no longer killing what we eat – as described in Genesis 1:26-31. In Paradise, prior to the Fall, human beings were vegetarians.

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild

animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." ²⁷ So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

²⁹ Then **God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.** ³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so. ³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

4.) Christians fast because the prophets of the Old Testament like Moses, Elijah, Nehemiah and Joel, as well as the people of ancient Israel, fasted in preparation for their encounters with God and as a sign of repentance, mourning and humility.

Nehemiah 1:4

⁴ When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days **I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.**

Joel 2:12-13, 15

¹² "Even now," declares the LORD, "**return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.**" ¹³ Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. ¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion, **declare a holy fast**, call a sacred assembly.

Psalm 69:10 (11)

¹¹ **I humbled my soul with fasting.** (*Septuagint*)

5.) Christians fast because, in a consumer society such as ours that identifies people by what they have rather than who they are, we engage in a counter-cultural lifestyle in which we can identify with the poor.



What fasting is not:

1.) It is *not* just about food. It is an entire lifestyle of justice, mercy and compassion.



Isaiah 58:1-10

The Nature of True Fasting

¹ "Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins. ² For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them.

³ 'Why have we fasted, O Lord' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'

"Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. ⁴ Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. ⁵ Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like

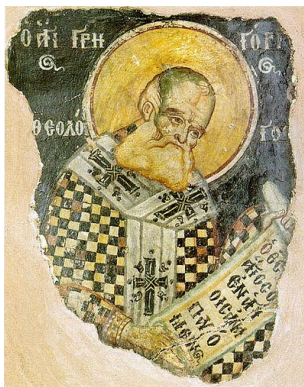
a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? ⁶ "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

⁸ Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. ⁹ Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, ¹⁰ and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.

What the Saints say about the Discipline of Fasting as a Way of Life

St. John Chrysostom (347-407AD)

Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works. If you see a poor man, take pity on him. If you see a friend being honored, do not envy him. Do not let only your mouth fast, but also the eye and the ear and the feet and the hands and all the members of our bodies. Let the hands fast, by being free of greed. Let the feet fast, by ceasing to run after sin. Let the eyes fast, by disciplining them not to glare at that which is sinful. Let the ear fast, by not listening to evil talk and gossip. Let the mouth fast from foul words and unjust criticism. For what good is it if we abstain from birds and fish, but bite and devour our brothers? May HE who came to the world to save sinners strengthen us to complete the fast with humility and have mercy on us and save us!



St. Gregory the Theologian (330-391AD)

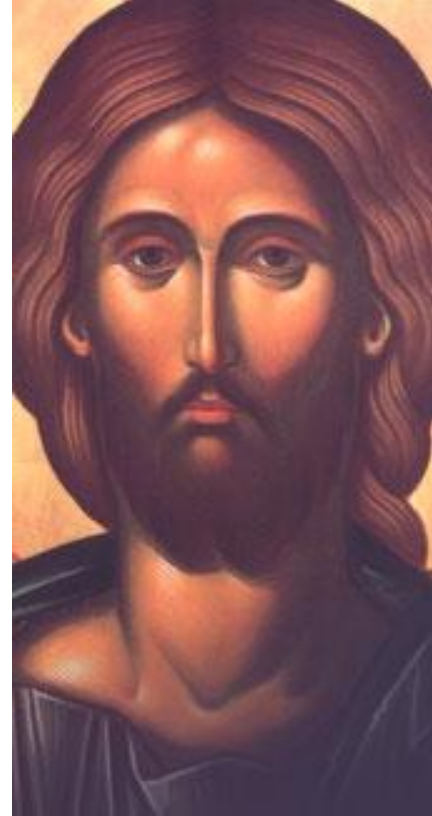
Let no one believe that fasting alone is sufficient for salvation. Since our salvation is not gained solely by fasting, let us make up for what is lacking in our fasting by giving alms to those who are poor. Let us protect the widow, be concerned for the welfare of orphans, comfort those who mourn, give shelter to the stranger, clothe the naked and cherish the sick. **The Lord blesses only that fast which bears fruit in almsgiving, a fast that is joined with love for our neighbor and founded on compassion.** Anything which you deny yourself when fasting should be given to feed another so that the body of your hungry neighbor may be nourished by your abstinence.

2.) Fasting does *not* make us “better” than anybody else.

Luke 18:9-14

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

⁹ To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² **I fast twice a week** and give a tenth of all I get.' ¹³ "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' ¹⁴ "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."



Matthew 15:11, 18-19

¹⁰ Jesus called the crowd to him and said: "Listen and understand. ¹¹ What goes into your mouth does not defile you, but what comes out of your mouth is what defiles you." ¹⁸ For the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these defile you. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

Romans 14:2-4

² One person's faith allows them to eat everything, but **another person, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.** ³ The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and **the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does,** for God has accepted that person. ⁴ **Who are you to judge someone else's servant?** To their own master they stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.



