
C H A P T E R 2 :

A Body Humble *Before* God:
How *Fasting* Helps Heal Our
Relationship *with* God

When you are fasting, do not put on a gloomy look as the hypocrites do: they go about looking unsightly to let people know they are fasting. In truth I tell you, they have had their reward. But when you fast, put scent on your head and wash your face, so that no one will know you are fasting except your Father who sees all that is done in secret; and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you. (Mt 6:16–18)

It is significant that Christian fasting, if it is authentic, has nothing of the grimness and extreme efforts of willpower and self-control. Lent in the Catholic liturgy is called “this joyful season,” and in the Orthodox liturgy it is referred to as

a time of “bright sadness.” Why such paradox? A penitential season can be joyful and bright because it is done communally, a group effort of mutual support and encouragement, and, more importantly, because it redirects our attention away from ourselves and toward God. Grim determination and feats of willpower will get you only so far and are often self-defeating. In the end we come to realize it is only God who saves, and that is such a relief.

Jesus’ instructions on fasting are situated within the Gospel According to St. Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7). The whole Christian life in all its loftiness and rewards may be found there. The sermon famously begins with the eight beatitudes, the blessings promised to the poor, the sorrowful, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure of heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. Jesus then sets forth a higher standard of human behavior, forbidding not just the act of murder but the angry thoughts from which murder arises, not only adultery but adulterous intentions. He requires nonresistance to evildoers and the love of enemies. He teaches the Our Father.

This perfect prayer, the Lord’s own, contains among its seven petitions, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Jesus thus directs us toward God for our daily sustenance. Notice the significant redundancy in the petition: give us *today* the bread we need for *today*. In this way the Lord anticipates what he will later say in his sermon, “So do not worry about tomorrow: tomorrow will take care of itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Mt 6:34). Note also that another meaning of the Greek word we translate as “daily” is “supersubstantial,” something beyond material bread. This is in keeping with the words Jesus used to reject Satan’s temptation to

turn stones into bread to satisfy his physical hunger: “Human beings live not on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4).

The Sermon on the Mount as a summary of Christian living makes necessary reference to the three pillars of Jewish piety in the Old Testament—almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. In each of these Jesus places emphasis upon their ultimate purpose, which is not mere exterior practice but rather a recognition of the nature of our relationship with God. We love others, we fast, and we pray in order to fulfill the Great Commandment: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:37–39).

It has been rightly observed that the shadow of Jesus’ own life is all over the Sermon on the Mount.¹ In the beatitudes in particular we find a true portrait of Jesus himself. In the manner also in which Jesus portrays the three pillars of piety, we find the model of how Jesus himself loved others, prayed, and fasted. All three are directed specifically to God. Jesus emphasizes that these things must be done not as acts of self-exhibition but to be seen only by God. The meaning of fasting emerges clearly as an act of humility before God, as a sign of repentance for our sins, and as necessarily accompanied by prayer. Charity toward others is regarded as a true sign that our fasting and prayer have led to a heart truly transformed.

THE
Spirituality
OF
Fasting

Rediscovering a Christian Practice

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