

## **Fasting Basics**

by John Chrysostom

The Pharisee who went up to the temple to pray fasted twice a week. But after he prayed he went away empty, deprived of the fruit of his fasting. On the other hand, the tax collector who went up to pray did not fast. Yet God accepted him in preference to the

Pharisee who had fasted (see Lk. 18:9-14).

Why did Jesus tell this story? So that we may learn that fasting is unprofitable unless it is accompanied by obedience to God. The pagan people of Nineveh fasted, and they won the favor of God. Yet God's people the Jews sometimes fasted and profited nothing.

Fasting is a medicine. But a medicine, however beneficial it may be, is useless in the hands of an unskilled person. Let us see, then, how the Ninevites fasted, and how they were delivered from divine wrath.

### **Turn from Evil**

The king of Nineveh proclaimed: "Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything: let them not feed nor drink water: but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God" (Jon. 3:7-8, *KJV*). But was it only such fasting and sackcloth that turned back the unyielding wrath of God?

I insist that it was not. What saved them from God's anger, rather, was a change of their whole way of life: "Let every one," said the king, "turn from his evil way" (v. 8, *NKJV*). How do we know God responded to their repentance? From the very language of the Scripture itself. For after it speaks of God's wrath, and their fasting, it goes on to speak of the Ninevites' reconciliation with God. To teach us the cause of the reconciliation, it says this: "And God saw what they did" (v. 10).

What did they do that God saw? Had they merely fasted? Had they merely put on sackcloth? Nothing of the sort. Passing over all these points in silence, the text adds, "They turned from their evil way, [and] God repented of the evil which He said He would do to them" (v. 10).

Do you see, then, that fasting in itself did not rescue them from this danger? Rather, it was the change of their lives that called forth God's favor and kindness toward these unbelievers.

Don't get me wrong: I say these things, not to discredit fasting, but to esteem it. For the value of fasting consists not in abstinence from food, but in withdrawing from sinful practices. In fact, those who limit their fasting only to abstinence from food actually dishonor it.

### **Evidence of a True Fast**

Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your good deeds! What kind of good deeds? If you see a poor man, take pity on him! If you see an enemy, be reconciled to him! If you see a friend receiving honor, don't envy him! If you see an alluring woman, pass her by!

Don't just fast with your mouth, but also with your eyes, and your ears, and your feet, and your hands, and all the members of your body. Let the hands fast by being cleansed of plunder and greed. Let the feet fast by ceasing to run to immoral shows.

Let the eyes fast by refusing to stare lewdly at lovely faces. After all, looking is the food of the eyes. If what we look upon is immoral or forbidden, it mars our fast and upsets the whole safety of our soul. But if what we look upon is moral and safe, it adorns our fasting. Wouldn't it be most absurd to abstain from lawful food because of a fast, but at the same time to touch with the eyes what is unlawful?

Let the ear fast as well. The fasting of the ear consists in refusing to pay attention to evil gossip and slander.

Let the mouth, too, fast from disgraceful speech and criticisms. For what does it profit us if we abstain from the flesh of birds and fish, yet bite and devour our brothers? Those who speak evil eat the flesh of their brothers and bite the body of their neighbors. Because of this Paul utters the fearful saying: "If you bite and devour one another beware, lest you be consumed by one another" (Gal. 5:15, *NKJV*). You have not fixed your teeth in their flesh, but you have fixed your slander in their souls, and inflicted on them a wound of evil suspicion. You have harmed, in a thousand ways, both yourself and them.

Let us consider, then, let us ponder, let us resolve how we may live according to these instructions. Let us exert ourselves in every way possible. If we set our lives in order, I promise you that we will see a great deliverance in answer to our prayers.

**About the author: John Chrysostom** (c. 347-407) was the bishop of ancient Constantinople, the second capital of the Roman Empire. He was famed for his eloquent preaching, which earned him the moniker "Golden-Mouthed" (in Greek, "Chrysostom"). This excerpt comes from his *"Third Homily on the Statues."*

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