

## DISCIPLINES OF GREAT LENT

### **Almsgiving + Prayer + Fasting**

Almsgiving, Prayer, and Fasting are three defining practices of the Christian life in general, and our Orthodox discipline of Great Lent in particular. Great Lent is the school of the Orthodox Church. Almsgiving, Prayer, and Fasting are the disciplines of a healthy Christian life taught and encouraged during Great Lent.

“There are three things which most belong to religious actions, namely, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, in the exercising of which while every time is accepted, yet that ought to be more zealously observed, which we have received as hallowed by tradition from the Apostles...For by prayer we seek to propitiate God, by fasting we extinguish the lusts of the flesh, by alms we redeem our sins; and at the same time God’s image is throughout renewed in us...Because in prayer faith remains steadfast, in fastings life remains innocent, in almsgiving the mind remains kind.” (St. Leo the Great of Rome, *Sermon On the Fast of the Tenth Month, I.4*)

“Almsgiving heals the soul’s incensive (i.e., emotional) power; fasting withers sensual desire; prayer purifies the intellect (i.e., reasoning power) and prepares it for the contemplation of created beings. For the Lord has given us commandments which correspond to the powers of the soul.” (St. Maximos Confessor, *First Century on Love, 79*)

The Lord Jesus lists these three practices in His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:1-18), and they are mentioned throughout Scripture either as a single subject or in combination, e.g., “fasting and prayer” (Mk. 9:29). Following are counsels explaining these disciplines and rules (standards) for their profitable use in your personal practice of the Faith.

### **+ Almsgiving**

- **ALMSGIVING**, or the giving of alms, is an English translation of the Greek word *eleēmosyne*, from the root *eleos*, meaning “mercy.” The concept of almsgiving is *mercifulness*, specifically *acts of mercy*, or *charitable deeds*, given to the poor and needy.

- *Do almsgiving from your possessions to all who do righteousness. When you do almsgiving, do not let your eye be envious. Do not turn your face away from any poor man, so the face of God will not be turned away from you. (Tobit 4:7)*
- *Prayer is good with fasting, almsgiving, and righteousness. A few prayers with righteousness are better than many with wrongdoing. It is better to do almsgiving than to lay up gold. For almsgiving rescues one from death, and it will wash away every sin. Those who do almsgiving and are righteous will be full of life. But those who sin are enemies of their own life. (Tobit 12:8-10)*
- *The one who has mercy on the poor lends to God, and He will repay him according to his gift. (Proverbs 19:17)*
- *Therefore, O king, let my counsel be pleasing to you, to atone for your sins with alms and your wrongdoings with compassion on the poor. Perhaps God will be longsuffering regarding your trespasses. (Daniel 4:27)*
- *Store alms in your storerooms, and they will deliver you from all affliction. More than a mighty shield and better than a strong spear almsgiving will fight for you against your enemy. (Wisdom of Sirach 29:12-13)*
- *“Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys.” (Luke 12:33)*

### **Rules (Standards) of Almsgiving:**

1. Consciously lay aside alms for other persons in need; alms take the forms of various basic needs: food, clothing, and/ or money.
2. Give alms without judgment of the person receiving them.
3. Give alms “in secret” (Matt. 6:4), that is, without others knowing that you are giving and without any expectation of recognition.

### **+ Prayer**

- **PRAYER** is communication with God with the goal of unbroken communion with God. The common Greek word for prayer, *prosevchē*, is based on the root *evchē*, meaning “vow”; therefore, prayer encompasses every activity of life vowed, or committed, toward God in a variety of forms: thanksgiving, petition, supplication, intercession, confession, and praise.

- *“Let Your eyes and Your ears be open to the supplication of Your servant and the supplication of Your people Israel, to hear them about everything, whenever they call to You.” (3 Kingdoms 8:50)*
- *But I cried out to God, and He heard me. Evening and morning and midday, I shall tell; I shall proclaim, and He will hear my voice. (Psalm 54:17-18)*
- *Then I set my face toward the Lord God to seek Him in prayer and supplication, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes. So I prayed to the Lord my God and made confession. (Daniel 9:3-4)*
- *“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.” (Matthew 7:7-8)*
- *“And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.” (Mark 11:25)*
- *So [Jesus] Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed...Now it came to pass in those days that He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. (Luke 5:16; 6:12)*
- *Then [Jesus] spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart...“Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.” (Luke 18:1; 21:36)*
- *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. (Philippians 4:6)*
- *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thessalonians 5:16)*

### **Rules (Standards) of Prayer:**

1. Genuine and true prayer is first and always prayer of the heart, “in the secret place” (Matt. 6:6). The first rule of prayer is a pure heart, that is, a good conscience being cleansed in repentance, faith, and love.
2. Build a habit of prayer of prescribed daily and weekly prayers: the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13); liturgical services (Acts 2:42); psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16); etc. [Set aside time each day to pray quietly in private, and each week to pray together with the Church in its services, especially during the Sunday Divine Liturgy for the reception of Holy Communion.]

3. Though a person may be alone when praying, prayer is always done with others in mind, for their peace, forgiveness, and well-being (Mk. 11:25; 2 Cor. 1:10-11; Eph. 6:18).
4. The ultimate goal is ceaseless prayer, that is, the unceasing prayer of the heart energized by the grace of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:26-27).

## + Fasting

- **FASTING** is abstinence from all or certain kinds of food and drink for a specific period of time. The purpose of fasting is to curb the desires of the flesh beginning with the stomach so as to prevent over-indulgence not only in food and drink, but in all desires of the flesh. Fasting humbles the flesh before the spirit and frees the flesh to pursue more important spiritual desires.
- *And the Lord God commanded Adam, saying, "You may eat food from every tree in the garden; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you may not eat; for in whatever day you eat from it, you shall die by death."* (Genesis 2:16-17)
- *The children of Israel said to [Moses and Aaron], "Would we had died, smitten by the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and eat bread to the full. For you brought us out into this desert to kill this whole assembly with hunger." Then the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread out of heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not."* (Exodus 16:3-4)
- *So [Moses] was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. He wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.* (Exodus 34:28)
- *So [the Lord your God] dealt harshly with you and weakened you with hunger, and fed you with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word proceeding from the mouth of God man shall live.* (Deuteronomy 8:3)
- *Now on the twenty-fourth day of his month, the sons of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads. Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.* (Nehemiah 9:1-2)
- *Now says the Lord your God, "Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting and wailing and with mourning; rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for He is merciful and compassionate."* (Joel 2:12-13)

- *And the men of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least...and they cried out fervently to God; and they each turned back from their evil ways and from the wrongdoings of their hands, saying, "Who knows if God shall have a change of heart and turn from His fierce anger, that we should not perish?" (Jonah 3:5, 8-9)*
- *"I did not choose this fast, and such a day for a man to humble his soul; nor if you should bow your neck like a ring and spread sackcloth and ashes under yourself, could you thus call such a fast acceptable. I did not choose such a fast," says the Lord; "rather, loose every bond of wrongdoing; untie the knots of violent dealings; cancel the debts of the oppressed; and tear apart every unjust contract. Break your bread for the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house. If you see a naked man, clothe him, nor shall you disregard your offspring in your own household." (Isaiah 58:5-7)*
- *"Test your servants for ten days, and let them give us vegetables to eat and water to drink. After this let our countenance be observed by you and the countenance of the young men who eat at the king's table. Then deal with your servants as you see fit." (Daniel 1:12-13)*
- *And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast." (Matthew 9:15)*
- *"However, this kind (of demon) does not go out except by prayer and fasting." (Matthew 17:21)*
- *Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work." (John 4:34)*
- *As they ministered (lit., served the liturgy) to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away. (Acts 13:2-3)*
- *For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame – who set their mind on earthly things. For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. (Philippians 3:18-20)*

### **Rules (Standards) of Fasting:**

1. Every kind of food and drink given by God is good if used according to the measure of godly purpose, namely, health of the body and thanksgiving to God (Mk. 7:18-19; 1 Tim. 4:4).
2. Both the *quality* (kinds) and *quantity* (amount) of foods and drinks are impediments to godliness by our attachment to them to satisfy our own bodily desires (Jam. 4:3). Fasting purposely breaks that sinful attachment by eliminating or limiting both.
3. Fasting must be done “in secret” (Matt. 6:18) with spiritual, not physical, goals in mind: humbling body and soul, seeking the will of God in repentance, and care of others, not for personal recognition.

### **+ The Course of Orthodox Great Lent**

The season of Great Lent is a 40 day-long period of intense spiritual attention and practice in the Orthodox Church, especially for those who choose to keep it. In the Church year, Great Lent precedes and prepares for Holy Week and Pascha, that all-consequential remembrance of the suffering, crucifixion, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world. Participation in the disciplines of Great Lent prepares for participation in their completion during Holy Week and Pascha; this annual course re-presents in miniature the essence of one’s entire life in Christ.

Great Lent is a course of training (Gk., *askesis*; asceticism), a way of testing and proving the genuineness of one’s life by experience. The *40 days* of Lent are indicative of such testing: Noah’s ark on the flood (Gen. 7:17); Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex. 24:18); Israel’s journey to the Promised Land (Deut. 8:1-4); Elijah’s journey to Horeb (3 Kgm. 19:8); Christ in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-2). Since we travel on this journey of Great Lent, **ALMSGIVING, PRAYER, AND FASTING** are three mutually assisting components in a healthy, functioning person – corresponding to the *heart (soul)*, *mind (spirit)*, and *body* - enabling one to move forward on the road toward the goal of the Kingdom of God.

“O Almighty Master, who in wisdom has fashioned all creation, who through Thine ineffable providence and great goodness has led us to these all-revered days for purification of souls and bodies, for restraint of passions, and for hope of the resurrection, who during the forty days did put into the hands of Thy servant Moses the tables in letters divinely inscribed, grant unto us also, O Good One, to fight the



good fight, to complete the course of the fast, to preserve the faith undivided, to crush the heads of invisible serpent, to be shown to be conquerors of sins, and without condemnation also to attain unto and to worship the holy Resurrection.” (Prayer before the Ambo [at the end of] the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts)

### **NORMS for the Disciplines of Orthodox Lent:**

- Lent begins with the **RITE OF MUTUAL FORGIVENESS** at which every person asks for, gives, and receives forgiveness from everyone else.
- The **CANONICAL STANDARD OF FASTING** for the duration of Lent is abstinence from the flesh of any killed animal (meats and fish), and from foods produced by animals (eggs, milk, and cheese) [Quinisext, 56; Laodicea, 50], recalling the original, pre-fall condition of man (cf. Gen. 1:29; 9:1-4). This standard is relaxed for infants, pregnant mothers, and the infirm who require these foods for their physical condition.
- **WEDDINGS** are not celebrated during Lent (Laodicea, 51), preserving the integrity of the Fast as it pertains to curbing other sinful passions (cf. 1 Cor. 7:5). In addition to abstinence from certain foods, the standard of fasting for Lent includes **ABSTINENCE FROM ENTERTAINMENTS** provoking sensual desire (Rom. 13:13; 1 Pet. 4:1-4).
- The **PRAYER OF ST. EPHRAIM THE SYRIAN** is said at every weekday service with prostrations: *O Lord and Master of my life, give me not the spirit of idleness, curiosity, love of power, and idle talk; but grant me, Your servant, a spirit of whole-mindedness, humility, patience, and love. Yea, O Lord and King, gift me to see my own failings and not to condemn my brother, for blessed are You unto ages of ages. Amen.*
- **PROSTRATION** (kneeling and touching the forehead to the ground) is the posture expressing true devotion and servitude before God (Ps. 94:6; Ez. 1:27; Matt. 2:11).
- The **LITURGY OF THE PRESANCTIFIED GIFTS** is appointed for reception of Holy Communion on weekdays. The Body and Blood of Christ are sanctified during the Divine Liturgy of the previous Sunday and reserved on the Altar for distribution to the faithful during the week as their Daily Bread, the Bread of Life, Christ Himself (Jn. 6:35, 51). This service compiled by St. Gregory the Great consists of Vespers and prayers for the reception of Holy Communion.
- The **GREAT CANON OF ST. ANDREW OF CRETE** is prayed in four parts within the service of Great Compline on the first four days of Lent, and then again in

the fifth week of Lent in its entirety within the service of Matins, together with the reading of the **LIFE OF ST. MARY OF EGYPT** (by St. Sophronios of Jerusalem). The *Great Canon* is a long meditation on repentance drawn from many examples in both Testaments of Scripture, and the *Life of St. Mary* is a striking example of the power of repentance.

- The books of **GENESIS, PROVERBS, AND ISAIAH** are assigned to be read daily as instruction in salvation history, wisdom, and prophecy of the Savior.
- In the daily cycle of services during Lent, the entire **BOOK OF PSALMS** is appointed to be read and prayed twice per week.
- The **DIVINE LITURGY OF ST. BASIL THE GREAT** is served on the Sundays of Lent. The Anaphora prayer of St. Basil is a longer exposition of God's plan of salvation. The Divine Liturgy of St. Basil was the common Sunday liturgy served throughout the Orthodox Church until the tenth or eleventh century when the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom became more commonly served.
- The **SATURDAYS OF LENT** are special commemorations of the faithful departed:
  - + On the first Saturday boiled wheat (*koliva*) is prepared and served commemorating the fourth century miracle of the same associated with the **GREATMARTYR THEODORE THE RECRUIT**. Wheat is a symbol of certain resurrection of the departed (Jn. 12:24);
  - + On the second, third, and fourth Saturdays **MEMORIAL LITURGIES** are served in which all the faithful departed of the Parish are mentioned by name;
  - + On the fifth Saturday the **AKATHIST TO THE THEOTOKOS** is served. The Virgin Mary Theotokos (lit., *Birthgiver-of-God*) is the supreme example of all the saints, living and departed. An "akathist" is a prayer served "not sitting" (Gk., *a-kathistos*).
- The middle part of Lent is devoted to the **VENERATION OF THE CROSS** when the Cross adorned with flowers is placed in the center of the Church, and this hymn is sung before it with prostrations at the end of services: *Before thy Cross we bow down in worship, O Master, and Thy holy Resurrection we glorify.*
- Historically, Lent became the final phase of instruction for the **CATECHUMENS** (lit., *those being instructed*) to be baptized and/or chrismated – thus received into the Church – on Holy Saturday. Likewise for the baptized faithful, Lent became an opportune season to exercise repentance and commitment to the



Faith by personal **CONFESSION** of sins, the “science of spiritual medicine” (Quinisext, 102).