

Wonder

Volume: 2 Number: 2 Theme: **Preparing for Great Lent**

Title: **Fasting From Guilt** Author: **Luke Beecham**

Great Lent is nearly upon us and as we fast approach [get it... *cough*] one's mind naturally turns to things that will be "given up" for the Fast. There are the prescribed things that the Church asks us to fast from, but then there are also the things that each person adds on to that list for his or her individual struggle. Then there is that one thing that almost always silently creeps its way in – especially during Lent. Guilt – the gift that keeps on giving. We consider during the Fast the things that we eat, but what about those things that constantly eat at us – those perennial sins that we can never seem to conquer? We know about the still small voice of the Holy Spirit, but what about that other little voice...the one that condemns and accuses? That nagging little voice that reminds us of our sins and whispers in the wee hours of the morning that we can never measure up, we can never be free, and God could never love such a sinner as us...what about that voice? How do we deal with that little voice? *"I know! I'll fast like I've never fasted before! I'll eat next to nothing! I'll make it to all the services and I'll go to confession 3 times a week, and by Pascha, God will see how hard I've worked to repent!"* Right? Nothing could be further from the truth.

Of course God sees how hard all of us work to repent of our sins and shortcomings, but His love is no way dependent on how well we've fasted, what we've given up, how often we make it to confession, or how many services we show up for. These things are not ends in and of themselves. Guilt is toxic, and like a cancer can spread and infect nearly every aspect of our lives if left unchecked. Guilt is often responsible for a multitude of fear-driven, self-centered behaviors, and in the end, when we give into guilt we end up worse off than when we started. Why? Because guilt is still all about us! Guilt is not from God by a longshot, and guilt is certainly not repentance. All too often we put ourselves under enormous amounts of pressure to perform for God because of our guilt and because we think that we can somehow earn His love. The Lord strictly warns us that this is not so, and as we heard this past week in the account of the Publican and Pharisee, we see very plainly that even if we do everything right, when we do it for any other reason than out of love for God, including out of guilt, we are still wrong!

This Lent, plan to fast from guilt as well as from food, and remember that God shines on the just and the unjust alike and that nothing you or I can say or do will ever change that. We don't fast to "get in good with God." Fasting is a tool that the Church gives to us to help us rid ourselves of all those things that keep us from God, and also to remind us of His unconditional love and His abundant provision for us. This is why, in his Paschal sermon, St. John exhorts us that:

The Master is gracious and receives the last, even as the first; he gives rest to him that comes at the eleventh hour, just as to him who has labored from the first. He has mercy upon the last and cares for the first; to the one he gives, and to the other he is gracious. He both honors the work and praises the intention.

God is concerned with our heart, not with how many juicy steaks and creamy cheese cubes we give up. We could leave meat and dairy behind for the rest of our lives, but if our hearts are full

of pride, jealousy, lust, greed, and all other types of rot, it would make no difference. I'm not, of course, suggesting that we don't fast at all, or that we *intend* to fast and then do not, nor am I suggesting that we should not be remorseful and repent for our sins – far from it! What *I am* suggesting is that God accepts us as we are right now, and when we fast we do so because *we* need to draw closer to Him, not the other way around! As C.S. Lewis once said:

The Christian is in a different position from other people who are trying to be good. They hope, by being good, to please God if there is one; or — if they think there is not — at least they hope to deserve approval from good men. But the Christian thinks any good he does comes from the Christ-life inside him. He does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us; just as the roof of a greenhouse does not attract the sun because it is bright, but becomes bright because the sun shines on it.

When guilt becomes a part of our fasting, either us feeling guilty for not keeping the Fast, or us causing someone else to feel guilty about their fasting, we have missed the point entirely. Food nourishes us physically, but there is more to our well-being than just food, and while repentance and contrition restore us to God, guilt poisons and divides us from Him. So, fast from guilt this Great Lent, and learn to rely wholly on God. Trust in Him in all your ways and He will make your paths straight. Learn to fast from all of those things that keep you from God *as well* as from food this Lent, and go to the services as often as you are able – not because you have to, but because you can. Sit in silence and let the cares of the busy world melt away and let the psalms and the hymns soak into your soul, and begin to be healed. Confess your sins and let your guilt go. Leave the past in the past, and remember that you are beloved by God – YOU, the individual reader, not some abstract person – you – sinful, decadent, and rebellious you. God removes your sins as far as the East is from the West, and He remembers them no more.

I'll leave you with a little story passed along to me that is a good reminder of why we fast and why it matters what we put into ourselves. May God grants us strength, endurance, and wisdom as we begin the Fast with joy, but most of all, may He grant us love and wonder!

A Native American Elder was telling his granddaughter about a fight that was going on inside him. He said it was between two wolves. “One is evil: anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego. The other is good: joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.” The granddaughter thought about it for a minute and then asked her grandfather, “Which wolf wins?” The elder simply replied, “The one that I feed.” [Native American proverb]

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Discussion Questions:

How do you identify and handle guilt in your own life? Do you think it's a problem for your spiritual well-being?

Do you ever feel a divide between your ascetical efforts (such as fasting) and your daily actions, words, feelings, and thoughts?

Does a desire to "get in good" with God actually motivate your behavior? What are the motivations and reasons why you fast, go to church and/or do charitable works? Does the motive matter?

What do you think of the Native American proverb that the author concluded with? Is it reflective of reality? Is it useful?