

FASTING IS A COMMANDMENT OF GOD

Fasting was the first commandment God gave to man. “And the Lord God commanded Adam,” say the Holy Scriptures, “from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you may not eat” (Gen. 2:16-17). Do you see? It says He “commanded.” In other words, He gave a commandment. What was this commandment? “You will not eat from it.” What does this order “you will not eat” signify, if not fasting? He did not give them the choice to fast, but a serious warning that they would receive a frightful punishment. “Whatever day you eat from it,” said the Lord, “you shall die by death” (Gen. 2:17).

Nevertheless, Eve “took its fruit and ate.” Do you see what it says? She ate, and “also gave it to her husband with her, and he ate” (Gen. 3:6). It underlines the word “ate” so you can understand that the commandment which they transgressed was nothing other than breaking the fast.

If Adam had listened to this first commandment, he would not have heard the second one: “earth you are, and to earth you shall return” (Gen. 3:19). However, he did not restrain himself, he was defeated by his stomach, and he disobeyed. This is why death, sorrows, worries, life “worse than death,” thorns, thistles, pain, and suffering followed. Do you see how displeased God becomes when fasting is disregarded? Do you see, dear reader, how death entered into the world through gluttony?

Also consider how the Holy Scriptures thereafter often censure eating without moderation. It is recorded: “and the people sat down to eat and drink, and then they rose up to play” (Ex. 32:6). Somewhere else it says: “Jacob ate and was filled, and the beloved kicked; he grew fat, he grew thick...then he forsook God Who made him” (Dt. 32:15). Moreover, they who lived in Sodom brought upon themselves the unavoidable wrath of God not only on account of their other evil deeds, but also this one. Listen to what the prophet says: “this is the sin of Sodom...in fullness of bread and abundance of wine, she and her daughters lived in self-indulgence” (Ez. 16:49).

Because we did not fast, we were exiled from Paradise. Therefore, let us fast now, so we can enter back into it again.

—by St. John Chrysostom—

Fasting was first prescribed in Paradise. Adam received the first commandment: “from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat” (Gen. 2:16-17). The phrase “shall not eat” is an ordinance of fasting and abstinence. Subsequently, this commandment was known to and observed by both the Jews and the Gentiles.

Almost all the prophets spoke of fasting. Behold a sample of Old Testament verses that attest to this truth:

“So he [Moses] was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water” (Ex. 34:28).

“So he [Elijah] arose, ate and drank: and he went with the strength of that food forty days and forty nights, as far as Mount Horeb” (3 Kg. 19:8).

“In those days, I, Daniel, was mourning three full weeks. I ate no desirable food, and no meat or wine entered my mouth” (Dan. 10:2-3).

“Thus says the Lord Almighty: ‘The fourth-month fast, and the fifth-month fast, and the seventh-month fast, and the tenth-month fast shall be for joy and gladness and in good feasts to the house of Judah” (Zec. 8:19).

“Prayer is good with fasting, almsgiving, and righteousness” (Tb. 12:8).

“Sanctify a fast. Call a solemn assembly. Gather all the elders and all the people of the land into the house of the Lord your God, and cry out fervently to the Lord” (Joel 1:14).

“Now says the Lord your God, ‘Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting and wailing and with mourning” (Joel 2:12).

The New Testament also documents the tradition of fasting. The disciples of John the Forerunner came to Christ asking: “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?” (Mt. 9:14-15). The prophetess Anna is described as “a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings, and prayers night and day” (Lk. 2:37). The Pharisee also boasted: “I fast twice a week” (Lk. 18:12).

Furthermore, the Gentiles also knew of fasting. The Ninevites and Cornelius the centurion serve as examples. After hearing the preaching of Jonah, “the men of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on sack-cloth, from the greatest of them to the least” (Jonah 3:3-5). And Cornelius the centurion confirmed: “Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house” (Acts 10:30).

Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, both with His divine example as well as with His teaching, confirmed that fasting is a God-given commandment.

Immediately after being baptized and before beginning to preach the Gospel, “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry” (Mt. 4:2 & Lk. 4:2). Clearly the God-man did this not because He was in need of fasting, but to leave us with an everlasting example to follow.

Jesus Christ indicated that after His crucifixion and resurrection His faithful followers would fast: “But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and they will fast in those days” (Mk. 2:19).

He also taught us how we should fast: “When you fast, do not be like the hypocrites...But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face” (Mt. 6:16-17), and He assured us that we will be rewarded for keeping the commandment of fasting: “and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (Mt. 6:18).

Moreover, He verified that fasting and prayer are powerful weapons in the war against our passions and the demons: “This kind [of demons] does not go out except by prayer and fasting” (Mt. 17:21).

In following, the Holy Apostles kept this ordinance given by Christ. In the book of Acts, there is reference to a specific fast period: “Now when much time had been spent, and sailing was now dangerous because the Fast was already over” (Acts 27:9).

The Apostles themselves fasted frequently: “in fastings often” (2 Cor. 11:27), especially prior to beginning various godly works: “as they [the Apostles] ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said...Then having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away” (Acts 13:2-3). Furthermore, they advised us to fast: “that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer” (1 Cor. 7:5); and, finally, they specified that all Christians should fast every Wednesday and Friday, as well as forty days prior to Pascha, unless someone is prevented by a physical illness (Apostolic Canon 69).

From all the above, it is evident that fasting was not invented by human beings, but, rather, that it is a commandment given by God to humanity, that it was practiced by holy men of the Old Testament, that it was taught to us by our Lord Jesus Christ, that it was reaffirmed by the Holy Apostles, and that it became a requirement for all the faithful children of the Orthodox Church from generation to generation.