

THE CONCEPT OF FASTING

The Discipline of the Body There are two aspects to the exercise of fasting. The first one is the discipline of the body. Any time something is limited in its freedoms, it becomes subject to whatever force is limiting it. So, when I make my body do what I need instead of what it wants, I become its master. In other words, if I tell my feet to walk and where to go, or if I tell my hands to work and what to do, or if I tell my brain to solve a problem and which one—I gain control over this incredible gift of God called my body. On the other hand, if my body forces me to do what it wants, then it becomes my master. And it would not, perhaps, be so bad if the body wanted what was best for me. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. Each person has his or her own vices yielding to our fallen nature, but in general, we know that given a choice, our body does not always choose wisely: it wants to be lazy rather than productive; it wants to eat junk food rather than healthy food; and our brain just wants to party or get into mischief—often to the detriment of the body. All of this may sound simple enough, but what are we talking about? What is the body, and who is it that is supposed to be in charge? The dichotomy of body and soul is not within the scope of our talk, but for simplicity's sake, let us agree that when we say "body," we mean the whole of our nature: flesh, including brain, emotions, desires, will, intellect, etc. And the "you" is the hypostatic you, that which tells your brain to solve a math problem and the brain obediently solves it, it is the "I" in "I love you," and it is the "my" in "my name is..." But it so happens that in English, when we say "body" we often refer to the physical body. This is not, however, the biblical use of this word. Thus, the discipline of the body is exercised for the purpose of keeping one in charge of his body. In our fallen state, the natural order of our being has been perverted: the flesh with its passions and desires is the ruler of our being; our mind is a slave of the flesh and is preoccupied with figuring out how to fulfill the desires of the flesh; the soul feeds on the passions of the flesh, looking for pleasure and never finding satisfaction; and the spirit—the direction in which our entire being moves—is not that of God, but rather of corruption, waste, and destruction. In other words, the human spirit, the vector, is missing its true mark, which is God. In Christianity, this is known as "sin," or ἀμαρτία (a-mar-teeya) in Greek, which translates as "missing the mark" or "mistake." Fasting, then, helps us restore the divinely ordained order to our being: the spirit or vector must always point to God, the soul must find its fulfillment in communion with God, and the body, in all of its complexity, must serve the soul in its service to God. We may, and will, talk about meat, fish, shrimp and the like, but the main point is: if you cannot be in control of your stomach, if this simple sack of flesh is the ruler your life, how can you hope to be in control of more complex physiology, or your mind, or your soul?! This is not even a purely religious matter but a matter of being a human being. I once heard some teenagers bragging about breaking a fast as if it were some accomplishment to eat a hotdog or bacon on a fasting day. In reality, it is simply the mark of an individual who lacks self-control and is ruled by his gut—nothing at all to brag about. If I were that person, I would not advertise this embarrassing infantile quality and try to work on developing more self-discipline.

Unity with the Church The second aspect of fasting that I would like to mention is the unity of the Church which is the Body of Christ. Fasts and feasts of the Church create a certain kind of unity among its members. Think of your family: relatives have meals together, celebrate important events together, and stick together during sad times. This helps maintain cohesion and unity within the family, and if anyone decides to abstain from family life, then he or she is essentially cutting themselves off from the family. It is the same in the Church: we keep fasts together and we celebrate feasts together as a family of God. And if anyone decides not to fast together with the Church or not to join the Church family in festal celebrations, then they are separating themselves from our family, cutting themselves off from the Body. And if you do not want to join your brothers and sisters in this

short temporal life, how do you plan to spend eternity with them? Our faith is not individualistic; it is not about one solitary person being saved in some solitary way. Salvation is possible only in the Body of Christ, and only as a member of that Body. A branch which is cut off from the vine no longer inherits life but is thrown into a burn pile.