

The Wings of Fasting

St. Bernard of Clairvaux

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The Importance of Fasting (1/3)

“We have deserved hell, where there is never food, no comfort, no end—where the rich man begs for a drop of water and is not worthy to receive it.”

- ▶ Lazarus suffered evil things in life and was given comfort in death.
 - ▶ “But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish’ (Luke 16:25).
- ▶ St. Basil the Great connected Lazarus’ suffering in life with fasting.
 - ▶ “Don’t you realize that Lazarus entered paradise through fasting?”
 - ▶ “What gave Lazarus rest in the bosom of Abraham? Wasn’t it fasting?”

The Importance of Fasting (2/3)

"It is not only the abolition of sins but the uprooting of vices. It not only obtains pardon but wins grace. It not only cancels out sins we have committed in the past but also wards off those we might have committed in the future."

- ▶ Through faithful endurance of suffering Lazarus put away imperishable goods for eternal life.
- ▶ By voluntarily fasting we unite ourselves with Christ, who fasted forty days in the desert and three days in the tomb.
- ▶ Fasting cures us of our attachment to created things and destroys the deadly sin of gluttony.

The Importance of Fasting (3/3)

- ▶ Fasting, the opposite of self-indulgence, is antithetical to the nature of the demonic:
*“This kind [of demon] cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and **fasting**” (Mark 9:28–29).*
- ▶ Jesus does not make fasting optional, as evidenced by the fact that our Lord assumes that future Christians will fast:
*“**And when you fast**, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. **But when you fast**, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:16–17).*
- ▶ St. Luke records the apostles fasting in Acts (cf. Acts 13:2-3; 14:23).

The Wings of Fasting

Prayer demands the virtue of fasting, and fasting earns the grace of prayer. Fasting strengthens prayer; prayer sanctifies fasting and offers it to the Lord. What profit do we get from fasting if it remains on earth—which God forbid! Let us lift up fasting, then, on the wing of prayer.



But this wing may not be enough; we must add another to it. The prayer of the just, says Scripture, pierces the heavens. Let our fasting, then, have two wings—prayer and justice—that it may easily pierce the heavens.

The Wing of Justice (1/3)

“What is justice but to render to each what belongs to him? Do not, then, pay attention to God alone. You are also indebted to your superiors and to your brothers. God does not wish you to treat as worthless those to whom he attributes great worth.”

- ▶ By failing to be just to our neighbors, brothers, and superiors we fail to serve God, the origin of justice, who gives them their worth.
- ▶ We ought to take special care to treat our superiors justly, particularly our priests, bishops, and the pope (cf. Acts 23:3–5).
- ▶ We must even show regard to the secular authority whose power has its origin with God (cf. Romans 13:1–7).

The Wing of Justice (2/3)

“Perhaps you have been in the habit of saying, It is enough for me if God alone approves what I do. What does the opinion of humans matter to me? But be assured that he is in no way pleased by whatever you do that gives scandal to his children or is against the will of the one you have to obey as his representative.”

- ▶ It is a false piety to claim to regard God but not those God commands us to love.
- ▶ We have been “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10).
 - ▶ Neglecting the works of justice God prepared for us is akin to neglecting God himself.
- ▶ Remember that it would be better to have been drowned at the bottom of the sea than to give scandal to the children of God (cf. Mark 9:42).

The Wing of Justice (3/3)

*“Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly (Joel 2:15). What does call a solemn assembly mean? **Maintain unity, cherish peace, love the brotherhood.** The proud Pharisee kept a fast, he sanctified a fast since he fasted twice a week, and he gave thanks to God; **but he did not call a solemn assembly. He said, I am not like other men, and so, relying on one wing alone, his fast did not reach heaven.**”*

- ▶ The Pharisee keeps the fast but rejects the virtues that ought to be nourished by the one who fasts.
 - ▶ He rejects the love of neighbor.
- ▶ Fasting is done as part of the life of the Church, together in harmonious unity.
- ▶ The Lenten season is a time where the Church as a whole is assembled together in prayer and fasting to prepare for Easter.
 - ▶ A lent without pursuing unity and justice is contrary to the spirit of the fast.

The Wing of Prayer

“The more efficacious it [prayer] is, if done as it should be, the more skillfully does our adversary usually hinder it.”

- ▶ St. Bernard teaches something that we know all too well from experience, that the more efficacious our prayer becomes the more the devil seeks to destroy it.
- ▶ He identifies three dangers in prayer, knowledge of these dangers can help us attain greater purity in prayer.
 1. Timid Prayer: Cowardice of spirit and excessive fear.
 2. Rash Prayer: Overconfident, lacking in humility.
 3. Lukewarm Prayer: Neglect of a lively affection for God.

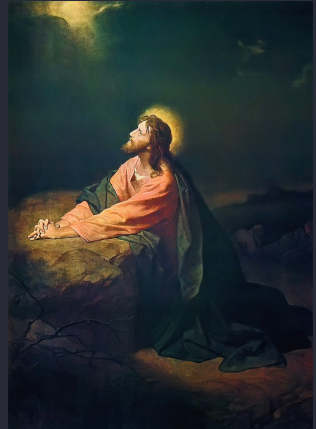


Figure: Christ in Gethsemane

The Wing of Prayer: Danger of Timid Prayer (1/3)

“The more efficacious it is, if done as it should be, the more skillfully does our adversary usually hinder it. Prayer is gravely hindered by cowardice of spirit and excessive fear. This often happens when a person thinks about his own unworthiness so much that he does not turn his eyes toward divine kindness.”

- ▶ There is a danger in becoming overly fearful of God in prayer.
 - ▶ Excessive fear can be detrimental to efficacious prayer.
- ▶ Some can struggle with allowing our unworthiness, the despicable sinners that we are, overcome our love of God.
 - ▶ If we feel deterred from prayer know that it is not from God but rather the devil.
- ▶ We ought not overemphasize our failings to the point of ignoring or outright denying the divine kindness of God.

The Wing of Prayer: Remedy to Timid Prayer (1/3)

“But deep calls to deep, a deep of light to a deep of darkness, a deep of mercy to a deep of misery (Psalm 41:8). The human heart is deep and inscrutable, but if my iniquity is great, Lord, much greater is your loving-kindness! Therefore when my soul is troubled within me, I remember the abundance of your mercy and I am refreshed by it, and when I enter into my [own] power I will not call to mind your justice only (cf. Psalm 6:4, 70:16 105:7; John 12:27).”

- ▶ God’s loving-kindness and mercy is greater than any sin of ours.
 - ▶ Christ on the cross bore our sins in his body and “by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24).
- ▶ Do not allow God’s justice to scare us into refusing to accept his love and mercy.
- ▶ In prayer we draw near to God and can accept his abundant mercy.

The Wing of Prayer: Danger of Rash Prayer (2/3)

*“Yet just as there is a danger of prayer being too timid, so on the other hand **there is no less danger, but rather more, of its being rash.**”*

“I call it rash when a person in whose conscience sin and vice still reign to some extent walks in great matters too wonderful for him, without consideration for the peril to his own soul.”

- ▶ Rash and overconfident prayer is a *greater* danger than timid prayer.
- ▶ St. Bernard says that rash prayer “goes up but falls back; it meets resistance, and far from winning grace, it deserves punishment.”
- ▶ The Pharisee practiced rash prayer when he prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men” (Luke 18:11).
 - ▶ Unlike the tax collector, he was not justified due to his arrogant and prideful prayer.

The Wing of Prayer: Remedy to Rash Prayer (2/3)

“I do not say that I would take away from sinners their confidence in prayer, but I want them to pray as people who commit sin, not as those who act justly. Let them pray with a contrite heart and humble spirit for forgiveness of their sins, like the publican who cried, God, be merciful to me, a sinner (Luke 18:13).”

- ▶ The remedy to rashness is not timidity, but rather to simultaneously hold in balance that we are both sinners and that God has mercy on us.
- ▶ Expressing our contrition of heart in our prayers to God develops a purity of prayer.
- ▶ “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”



Figure: The Pharisee and the Publican

The Wing of Prayer: Danger of Lukewarm Prayer (3/3)

- ▶ St. Bernard says that timid prayer “does not pierce heaven” due to immoderate soul-binding fear.
- ▶ Lukewarm prayer can be seen as a danger that sits between timid and rash prayer.
- ▶ This kind of prayer, due to its lukewarmness, “. . . grows weak in its flight and falls because it has no strength.”
 - ▶ “So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth” (Revelation 3:16).
- ▶ Lukewarmness, in one sense, is the worst of both worlds: you are neither held back by the immoderate fear of the timid nor are you propelled forward with the vigor of the rash.

The Wing of Prayer: Remedy to Lukewarm Prayer (3/3)

- ▶ St. Leo the Great in a sermon encourages us to raise up spiritual arms and enter consciously into a battle against the lukewarm spirit:
“If sloth holds any lukewarm or cares hold them occupied, now is the time to be equipped in spiritual arms and, aroused by the heavenly trumpet, to enter the battle...”
- ▶ St. Bonaventure in *The Life of St. Francis* recounts how, having realized that the devil was tempting him to lukewarmness, St. Francis engaged in penitential practices.
 - ▶ We, too, are called to do penance to enliven our relationship with Christ.
- ▶ We can see how connected fasting is with prayer: fasting aids us in remedying the dangers of prayer, prayer aids us in attaining the end of fasting.

Conclusion

“During this Lent we must truly seek with greater fervor that which is not just a part but is the entire mystery of this whole season. Therefore if perhaps your zeal has somewhat abated during recent days, it is fitting that you rekindle your fervor of spirit.”



Figure: The Holy Spirit as a Dove

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