

GREAT LENT AND PRAYER

“Behold, the appointed time; behold, the day of salvation, the entrance to the Fast. O my soul, be watchful, close all the doors through which the passions enter, and look up towards the Lord.”

[Matins Canon, Ode 1, First day of Lent]

As Great Lent is THE school of our Orthodox Faith, its ultimate subject-matter is Prayer. During Great Lent we learn the preconditions for Prayer, and we learn how to Pray personally within the corporate services of the Church.

1. As indicated in the above troparion, the preconditions for Prayer are *watchfulness* (or, vigilance) and *fasting* (i.e., closing-out the passions). St. Theophan the Recluse writes: “The principal condition for success in prayer is the purification of the heart from passions, and from every attachment to things sensual” (*The Art of Prayer*, pp. 63-64). To purify the heart we must be watchful with “the vigilance of a soldier who stands in the night as still as he can and as completely alert and aware as possible of anything that is happening around him, ready to respond in the right way and with speed to anything that may happen” (Met. Anthony Bloom, *Living Prayer*, pg. 93).

We cannot respond in the right way to what’s happening in our lives without being aware of our own habits, desires, and thoughts, and whether or not these habits, desires, and thoughts are in accordance with God’s will. During Lent, we assume – and rightly so – that most of our inclinations are in conflict with God’s will and that we’re

usually not even aware of these inclinations. We usually live to indulge our own pleasures with food, drink, and entertainments. We usually live to secure our own fortunes with money and possessions. We usually live to confirm our own importance and get angry when our ego isn’t stroked.

In the practice of watchfulness and fasting, Lent becomes a boot camp for our real spiritual combat. We counter immoderate desires for sensual pleasures with *abstinence* from various foods, drinks, and entertainments (yes, we have to turn off the computer, shut down the social media sites, and curtail the television). We fight greed for more and more stuff with *almsgiving* for the other person’s needs. We train against self-esteem, pride, and presumption with *remembrance of death, repentance, and humble obedience* to God through His Church.

Bodily disciplines guarding our senses go hand-in-hand with the need to guard our hearts. *“Let us observe a fast acceptable and pleasing to the Lord. True fasting is to put away all evil, to control the tongue, to forbear from anger, to abstain from lust, slander, falsehood and perjury. If we renounce these things, then is our fasting true and acceptable to God”* [Vespers Aposticha Verse, First Day of Lent]. The hard work of Lent consists of guarding our

heart “out of [which] proceed evil thoughts” (Matt. 15:19) by guarding our bodily senses. “Put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man (i.e., the sensual flesh) which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind (i.e., the heart)” (Eph. 4:22-23).

If we truly want to learn to pray to God aright, we have to banish the intrusive thoughts to which we’ve become accustomed. The careful practice of watchfulness and fasting results in a quiet and peaceful heart receptive to the prompting of God and focused on the doing of His will in Christ.

2. “Prayer is the primary work of the moral and religious life. The root of this life is a free and conscious relationship with God, which then directs everything. It is the practice of prayer that expresses this free and conscious attitude towards God, just as the social contacts of daily life express our moral attitude towards our neighbor, and our ascetic struggles and spiritual efforts express our moral attitude toward ourselves. Our prayer reflects our attitude to God, and our attitude to God is reflected in prayer” (*The Art of Prayer*, pg. 61).

“O my soul...look up towards the Lord” – this is the goal of Great Lent, an attitude of conscious attention to God, in other words, Prayer. As the word *attitude* literally means “posture,” we learn in Great Lent how to position ourselves before God in the grace-given relationship of faith known as Prayer.

Coupled with watchfulness and fasting, we learn to attend the services of the Church and say its prayers. This will take valuable time out of our day. We may feel weak. We stand and our legs hurt. We make prostrations. Yet all this shows an attitude of *devotion*, of *re-orientation* (lit., *repentance*), of *longing for God* above all other things.

Soon we learn to pray with understanding and feeling, gathering our wandering thoughts by enclosing them in the words of the prayers which direct us to see our true spiritual condition of sin and death, and to see salvation in Christ for the contrite and thankful. In the process, we chase away ideas born of our own imagination, fantasy, and incorrect thinking, and we pray with feeling born of silence and the mercy of God, often with tears.

“Anyone who devotes himself with special intensity to prayer is assailed by fearsome and savage temptations” (St. John of Karpathos, *Philokalia I*, pg. 307). Therefore Great Lent calls for assiduous watchfulness, fasting, and an unbending attitude of prayer *especially at the beginning*, as we take the first steps of the journey. Temptations will not cease throughout the course of Lent, but having made a good beginning, the foundation for the house of Prayer will have been laid. “And when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently against that house, and could not shake it, for it was founded on the rock” (Lk. 6:48). With mind and heart fixed on God, we will always be with the Lord.