

HOMILY SIX
TO ENCOURAGE FASTING
by Saint Gregory Palamas

INCLUDING A BRIEF WORD ON THE ORIGIN OF THE WORLD

THE INVISIBLE SERPENT, the originator of evil, is inventive, versatile and extremely skillful in contriving wickedness. He has means to hinder our good purposes and actions as soon as they begin. But if he fails to prevent them initially, he sets up other devices by which he can render them useless once they are underway. If he is unable to make them worthless when they are half way to completion, he knows other tricks and ways to invalidate them even once they are finished, and makes them a source not of reward but of harm to all but the most careful. First of all he points out how laborious and difficult to accomplish virtue is. In this way he fills us with laziness and despair, as though we were attempting difficult and impossible things and were therefore incapable of putting our intentions into action. Then he engenders disbelief in the rewards which God has promised to those who struggle.

2. But we, brethren, should rise above this trap by our soul's courage, eagerness and faith. We should bear in mind the fact that just as the earth cannot yield worthwhile fruit without labor, so the soul cannot acquire anything which pleases God or leads to salvation without spiritual struggles. But while it is possible to find earth which is unsuitable for cultivation, every human soul is naturally suited to virtue. As we are all unavoidably condemned, however, by the judgment given against our forefather, to live by labor and toil, let us turn necessity into an honor and willingly offer to God what is ours not by our own will. Let us give up transitory things in exchange for things that endure, and receive what is beneficial in exchange for what is harmful, transforming short-lived toil into a means to gain eternal ease. If we labor here for the sake of virtue we shall certainly attain to the rest promised in the age to come. He who promised is trustworthy and is at hand to help all who readily take on the struggle for virtue. If He who can do all things gives us His help, is anything impossible to achieve?

3. When we remember this and eagerly apply ourselves to virtuous actions, the evil one, knowing that nothing can be good unless it is done in a good way, strives to persuade us not to accomplish any good work with the object of pleasing God or of winning His approval, but to look for other people's approval. By this means he can deprive us of our reward from God and of all spiritual and heavenly honors. Let us frustrate these efforts of his by considering the great recompense stored up for those who live as God pleases, and how insignificant other people's approval is. Not only is it not worth mentioning in comparison with the great and holy glory to come, but it is also insufficient reason to neglect and waste our flesh.

4. Even after suffering this defeat, the originator of evil undermined us with pride, the last and worst abyss. He suggests conceited thoughts and persuades us to boast as though we had managed to be virtuous through our own ability and intelligence. But let us remember that the Truth says, "Without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5), and fend

off all the evil one's schemes. Let us do good works in a good way, with appropriate humility. If someone has a jar of precious perfume, whether he pours it out on to dung, or pours dung into the jar, he ruins and destroys the perfume. Be aware that, in the same way, whether someone rejects and discards virtue by his inaction, or mixes evil with his virtuous actions, he equally ruins and destroys virtue.

5. I am speaking to your charity on this subject in this present season of fasting, so that we may observe it together for our own sake unalloyed with anything evil. Fasting was of no benefit to that Pharisee in the Gospel, even though he always fasted two days a Week, because he had adulterated it with pride and condemnation of his neighbor (Luke 18:11-12). Not that this means fasting is unprofitable. Moses, Elijah and the Lord Himself showed how beneficial it is for those who fast properly in a way pleasing to God.

6. Moses fasted for many days. Awaken your minds, I entreat You, and lift them up at this opportune time, in company with Moses when he went up the mountain towards God. In this way may you start off afresh on your ascent, and be lifted up together with Christ, who did not merely go up a mountain but up to heaven, taking us with Him. Moses fasted for forty days on the mountain and according to the Scriptures he saw God, not darkly but face to face (Exod. 24:18). He talked to Him as someone would speak to his friend (Exod. 33:11, Deut. 34:10). He learnt from God and taught everyone about Him: that He is He Who eternally Is (Exod. 3:14) and will never cease to be, that He summoned what did not exist into existence, brought all things out of non-being and will not let them fall back into non-existence. In the beginning He brought the whole visible creation out of nothing all at once, just by a nod and His will. "In the beginning", it says, "God created the heaven and the earth" (Gen. 1:1), not empty of course, nor without all that lies between them. The earth was interspersed with water, and both were full of air, animals and plants of various kinds, whereas the heavens were full of the various lights and fires, from which the universe is formed.

7. So then, "in the beginning God made heaven and earth", as matter able to endure anything and strong enough to bear everything, rightly thereby dealing a blow from a distance to those who falsely hold that matter existed independently beforehand. Then He developed the world and embellished it. In six days He assigned to each of His creatures which made up His world its own due order. By His command alone He made the distinction between things, as if He were drawing out different kinds of treasure stored up in secret. He disposed and composed all things in complete natural harmony between themselves, each in relation to all, and all in relation to each. He surrounded the motionless earth, as a central point, with the higher circle of the perpetually moving heavens, holding them in place by means of what lies between, all according to His wisdom, that the universe might stay stable while in motion. When the heavenly bodies all around were moving unceasingly and at great speed, the motionless earth had of necessity to take its place at the centre, its stability counterbalancing the motion, lest the sphere of the universe roll off its course.

8. When the great Craftsman had assigned to each of the two boundaries of the universe its place, He made fast and set in motion this whole orderly world. He allotted to everything between heaven and earth its own properties. Some of His works He placed aloft and ordered them to move along a high course, going round at the same time as the upper boundary of the universe with beautiful regularity for ever. Such heavenly bodies are light, highly active and can be turned to the advantage of what lies below. They are wisely set very high above the central point so that, turning all around, they can sufficiently disperse the earth's excessive coldness, while their own extreme heat is contained in its place. In a way they can also restrain the excessive speed of the upper heavenly limits by themselves moving in the other direction, and they keep these limits in place by their counterbalancing orbit. They provide us with the great benefits of distinct annual seasons, a means of measuring periods of time and, to those who are able to understand, knowledge of God who created, arranged and ordered them.

9. So some of His works He set spinning and dancing round in mid-air in the upper regions, both for the sake of the world's beauty and to bestow a variety of benefits. Others, those which are heavy and have a passible nature, he put low down round the center. By their nature they come into being and pass away, are distinguishable from, yet comparable with, one another. When they suffer change they become more serviceable. He laid down an order for those creatures and how they relate to each other, that the whole might truly be called a world of perfect order.

10. At the creation first one thing was brought into existence, then another, then another and so on in turn. Last of all came man (Gen. 1:26), who was worthy of God's greater honor and consideration both before and after his creation. All the visible world was made before him for his sake. Immediately after the foundation of the world, before he existed, the kingdom of heaven was made ready for him. A divine Counsel concerning him preceded him, and he was created by God's hand and in His image. He did not take his whole being from matter or the visible world, like the other living creatures did, but only his body. His soul he took from the heavenly realms, from God Himself when He breathed life into him in a way that defies description (Gen. 2:7). Man was a great wonder surpassing all else, towering above everything, superior to all. Man was capable of knowing God, as well as receiving Him and declaring Him, and was most certainly the highest achievement of the Creator's sublime majesty. He had paradise for his home, specially planted by God (Gen. 2:8ff). There it was his lot to have sight of God, speak to Him face to face and receive a counsel and commandment from Him concerning the fasting appropriate to that place (Gen. 2:16-17). If he kept and observed this, he would remain free from death, toil and pain for ever.

11. Alas, he chose the treason of the serpent, the originator of evil, in preference to this commandment and counsel, and broke the decreed fast. Instead of eternal life he received death and instead of the place of unsullied joy he received this sinful place full of passions and misfortunes, or rather, he was sentenced to Hades and nether darkness. Our nature would have stayed in the infernal regions below the lurking places of the serpent who initially beguiled it, had not Christ come. He started off by fasting (Matt. 4:2, Luke 4:2, cf. Mark 1:13) and in the end abolished the serpent's tyranny, set us free

and brought us back to life, as Moses foretold (Deut. 18:15, 18-19, Acts 3:22; 7:37). After fasting on the mountain Moses received tablets, the work of God (Exod. 31:18), and later received again, on a second set of tablets, the law written by the finger of God (Exod. 34:1-4). He instructed the holy nation in the law and by his work he hinted at, and showed a glimpse of, Christ's future ministry. As Moses appeared as the liberator and savior of Abraham's race, so later Christ did the same for the whole human race.

12. Elijah, when he too had fasted forty days (1 Kgs. 19:8), saw the Lord on the mountain, not in fire, as the elders of Israel had earlier (Exod. 24:9-10, Deut. 5:23), but passing beyond the fiery vision by his God-pleasing fast, he saw the Lord in the sound of a light passing breeze (1 Kgs. 19:12 LXX). He had approached more closely to our Lord's words, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). For the sound prefigured the Truth and the preaching of Him who is Truth Itself, which rang out round all the ends of the earth, and the passing breeze prefigured the Spirit and grace.

13. From this vision while fasting Elijah also received power to anoint a prophet in his stead and bestow upon him a double portion of the grace he possessed, and to mount up above the earth in mid-air (2 Kgs. 2:9-11). This pointed clearly towards Christ's ascension from earth to heaven which was to happen later (Acts 1:9-11). While Christ Himself was fasting in the wilderness, He defeated our tempter by force and took away his power against mankind (Matt. 4:1-11, Mark 1:13, *cf.* Luke 4:1-13). Having at last put down his tyranny, he set our nature free and handed him over for sport to all those willing to live according to His Gospel. In this way He fulfilled the words of the prophets and by His works inscribed grace and truth upon the symbolic events which took place in ancient times.

14. You see the benefits of fasting, and how it has made us worthy of so many great gifts? Even from its opposite, unlimited eating and self-indulgence, it is possible to see the advantage of fasting. For the last two weeks our city was given over to gluttony and lack of self-restraint, and straight away we had troubles, shouting, fights, disturbances, shameless songs and obscene laughter. But this week when the fast came it made everything more honorable. It took us away from frivolity's expensive cares, stopped us tolling for the sake of our useless stomachs, set us instead to works of repentance and persuaded us not to labor for the food which perishes but for the food which endures to eternal life.

15. Where now are the slaughter of animals, the aroma of roasting meat, the variety of sauces and the cooks' best endeavors? Where are the men who run around the streets and pollute the air with their impure voices? Where are those who beat the drum and make music around houses and tables, and their devotees who join in with applause and eat their fill of the food set before them to the accompaniment of kettledrums and flutes? Where are those who spend their days and nights at parties, who are always looking for places to drink, who keep each other company in drunkenness and the shameful acts that result from it? Once the fast was proclaimed all these evils went away and all things good took their place. Instead of disgusting songs, mouths now sing

holy psalms. Instead of obscene laughter, there is salutary sorrow and tears. Instead of undisciplined outings and wanderings, everyone takes one and the same way to Christ's Holy Church. If unlimited eating produces a dense swarm of sins, fasting is the root of all virtues and the foundation of God's commandments.

16. Lack of self-control is actually an evil both ancient and modern, though it did not precede its antidote, fasting. By means of our forefathers' self-indulgence in paradise and their contempt for the fast already in existence there, death entered the world. Sin reigned and brought in the condemnation of our nature from Adam until Christ. The flood covered the whole earth because of the self-indulgence of Adam's descendants in this world of ours and their disdain for the chastity which came before. In those days God said to Noah, "My Spirit shall not abide in these men, for they are flesh" (*cf.* Gen. 6:3 LXX). The deeds of those who are flesh are none other than unlimited eating, drunkenness, sensual pleasure and the evils that spring from them. Because of the abominable depravity and self-indulgence among the men of Sodom, fire fell on them from heaven (Gen. 19:24). "Behold", says the prophet Ezekiel, "this was the iniquity of the men of Sodom, in fulness of bread they committed abomination" (*cf.* Ezek. 16:49-50). By means of this abomination, ignoring human nature they fell into unnatural unions. What deprived Esau, Isaac's firstborn, of his birthright and his father's blessing? Of course it was lasciviousness and an unreasonable demand for food (Gen. 25:25-34; 26:34-35, Heb. 12:16). Why were Eli's sons condemned to death, and why did he meet a violent death at the news of the death of his children, whom he had not disciplined with proper care? Surely it was because they took the meat from the cauldrons before the time and used it (1 Sam. 2:12-17; 4:11, 17-18). Also, the whole Hebrew nation, while Moses was fasting on the mountain for their sake, were indulging themselves to their own detriment. They ate and drank and rose up to play, as the Scripture says (Exod. 32:6), and their sport was worshipping an idol, for it was then that the incidents surrounding the fashioning of the calf took place among them.

17. Sensual pleasure causes ungodliness as well as sin, but fasting and self-control result in the fear of God as well as virtue. Fasting must be accompanied by self-control. Why? Because eating our fill, even of humble foods, is a hindrance to the purifying mourning, godly sorrow and contrition in our souls, which bring about unswerving repentance leading to salvation. For without a contrite heart we cannot really lay hold of repentance. It is the restriction of self-indulgence, sleep and the senses according to God's will that crushes our hearts and makes us mourn for our sins.

18. When that rich man in the Gospel said to himself, "Eat, drink and be merry" (Luke 12:19), the wretch made himself fit for the eternal flames and unfit for this present life. Let us, on the contrary, brethren, tell ourselves to be temperate, to fast, to keep watch, to be restrained, to be humble and to suffer hardship for our salvation. Then we shall finish this present life in a good way pleasing to God and inherit the blessed life without end.

19. May we all attain to this by the grace and love towards mankind of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belong glory, might, honor and worship, together with His Father

without beginning and the life-giving Spirit, now and for ever and unto the ages of ages.
Amen.

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