

St. Basil the Great's Second Homily on Fasting

translated by Kent Burghuis

*Our Holy Father Basil, Archbishop of Caesarea, Cappadocia.
On Fasting (De jejunio), Sermon 2.*

1. "Exhort the people, priests," it says; "speak into the ears of Jerusalem." The nature of that word "exhort" is enough to intensify the desires of the earnest, but also to stir to readiness those who are idle and careless.

That's how commanders operate. They marshal the army into place, and give a speech before the battle is engaged. The exhortation has so much power that it often produces a disdain for death in many. Similarly, coaches and athletic trainers use exhortation. Before the games in the stadiums the athletes are brought forward, and they are given speeches that are full of how they have to exert themselves so they can win the crown. So by persuasion, many can be joined together in ambition for victory, even to the disregard of their own bodies.

And so it is now with me. The soldiers of Christ have been ordered to war against invisible enemies, and the athletes of godliness are preparing themselves for crowns of righteousness through self-control. So the word of exhortation is indispensable.

So, what am I saying, brethren? I'm saying it makes sense that those who practice battle tactics, and those who work out in wrestling school, take in more food for their bodies the more strenuous the exertions are that they participate in. But, to those for whom "the struggle is not against blood and flesh, but against rulers, against authorities, against cosmic powers of this darkness, against spiritual forces of wickedness,"⁸¹⁷ to these, it is absolutely necessary to be disciplined for struggle through self-control and fasting.

While oil bulks up the athlete, fasting is the strength-training of the godly. So whatever robs the flesh, of that you will make the soul shine with spiritual health. Power to overcome invisible enemies doesn't come by bodily exertion, but by endurance of the soul. By patience trials are overcome.

2. Fasting is, therefore, useful all the time to those who take it up. (The abuse of demons can't challenge the one who fasts, and the angels who guard our lives love working more when they stay beside those who have made the soul clean through fasting.)

But now how much more, when all around the world the proclamation is being announced.⁸¹⁹ There isn't any island, land, city, nation, or remotest border where they haven't heard of the proclamation. Even armies and travelers, all alike hear the announcement, and they are receiving it joyfully.

So no one should leave himself off the list! People of every race, of all ages, and all different ranks are counted among those who fast. The angels are writing down the names of those who fast in each church. See to it that you don't forfeit the angelic register

through a little pleasurable food, and make yourself liable as a deserter, since you have been enlisted as a soldier by the scriptures.

The danger of the inexperienced soldier is that he will put down his shield when the battle is engaged. That's something that must be thoroughly warned against. Don't appear to be putting down the great weapon of fasting.

Are you rich? Don't insult the fast by refusing to eat at her table, as if she were unworthy of you. Don't send her away from your house, when you have been happily living in pleasure, and never denying yourself in accord with the divine principle of fasting. If you do, your judgment will come many times over in times of want, or bodily sickness, or some other gloomy circumstances. The poor should not pretend to ignore fasting, because in the past she lived together with you, and you had things in common.

Now women, fasting is as natural for your household as breathing. Children are nourished by fasting, just like thriving plants are sprinkled with water. From old times people have taken on the practice of it for themselves, and for the old it has made work light. Habitually practiced labors become less painful for those who have been trained.

To those who are traveling, fasting is a favorable traveling partner. While luxury forces them to bear burdens by carrying their enjoyments around, fasting prepares them to be light and unencumbered.

When a foreign war has been proclaimed and soldiers have been conscripted, they aren't furnished with luxuries. We have been sent out to war against invisible enemies. But after these victories we anticipate going to our home country up above. So isn't it appropriate that we be fed like an army, content with the conscription?

3. "Endure suffering as a good soldier," and contend lawfully, in order that you may be crowned. You know that "everyone who struggles is temperate in all things."

But someone will undermine me perfectly by saying something that shouldn't be overlooked: that to those who are soldiers of the world, their provisions increase in proportion to their efforts. But on the contrary, to those who are heavily-armed spiritually, the less they have of food, the greater honor they have.

Our helmet contrasts with the perishable kind; theirs is made of bronze, but ours consists of the hope of salvation. Their shield is made of wood and leather, but we hold out the shield of faith. We wear the breastplate of righteousness, but they have coats of chain-mail around them. We defend ourselves with the sword of the Spirit, but they carry iron.

So it's clear that foods don't produce the same kind of strength for both armies. The teachings of godliness strengthen us, even while they are enslaved by the fullness of their stomachs.

Now time has brought these much longed-for days around to us again. So let's welcome them into our homes like old nursemaids, who have been placed in the church for helping us to godliness.

Therefore, when you are going to fast don't be gloomy-faced like the Jews.⁸²⁶ Rather, like gospel believers, adorn yourselves with rejoicing in the soul from spiritual enjoyment, not mourning your empty stomach.

You know that "The flesh desires what is opposed to the Spirit, and the Spirit is opposed to the flesh." Therefore since "these things are adversaries to one another," let's rob the flesh of its comforts, and let's increase the soul's strength. Fasting will help us work through suffering until the victory feast is thrown for us, when we may be crowned with wreaths wrought by self-control.

4. Now you should already be preparing yourselves to be worthy of the honorable fast. Don't be getting drunk today and ruin tomorrow's self-control. This kind of rationalizing is evil, a wicked notion: "Since five days of fasting have been proclaimed for us, let's drown ourselves in drunkenness today."

No man who is about to celebrate lawfully marrying a wife goes and cohabits with concubines and prostitutes beforehand. The lawful wife won't put up with those corrupted companions. So don't expect fasting to put up with it, if you begin with drunkenness—that public prostitute, that mother of shamelessness, that lover of laughter, that madman-maker, that friend of everything shameful.

Fasting and prayer will certainly not enter into the soul defiled by drunkenness. The Lord admits the one who is fasting inside the walls of holy places, but he doesn't approve of extravagance, he regards that as profane and unholy.

If you come tomorrow smelling of wine, and of this rotten stuff, how will I regard your extravagance as fasting? Consider this: I don't regard what's going on lately as being pure, because you aren't purified by wine. How will I categorize you? With the drunks, or with those who fast?

When drunkenness has passed it drags its victim around. The presence of want corroborates the need for fasting. It could be argued that drinking takes you into slavery, because it doesn't pay you fairly. The evidence exhibited that you were working as a slave is the odor of the wine that remains behind in the bottle.

Then the first of the fast days becomes unfavorable to you, on account of the remains of the drinking that have been stored up in you. But if the beginning is unfavorable, then the whole time is also plainly rejected. "Drunkards will not inherit the kingdom of God." If you come to the fast drinking, what do you think is the point? If drunkenness closes the kingdom of God from you, what's the use of you fasting?

Don't you see, that even those who are experienced in the breaking of racehorses expect a struggle, since they haven't been won over beforehand? But with malice toward yourself you gulp down your fill. You rush to gluttony like so many animals.

A full belly not only makes running a race difficult, it even makes sleep tough. When you are weighed down completely and can't find a way to rest, you are forced instead to continually turn from side to side.

5. Fasting guards infants, chastens the young, dignifies the old—for gray hair is more venerable when it's adorned with fasting.

It is an attractive ornament to women, a preventative for aging, a castle for couples, a nurse of virginity. There are people like this in each house who diligently pursue it.

But how is our public life in this society? The entire city has come together, and the entire region adopts good conduct, puts to sleep the shouting, gets rid of quarrels, and silences insults. What teacher can control the clamor of children when they have assembled like fasting, as it shows how it makes a throbbing city orderly?

What kind of revelry begins with fasting? What sort of sensual performance comes from fasting? Seductive laughter, songs of harlots, and passionate dances are suddenly withdrawn from the city, having been banished by the austere judge that is fasting.

If only everyone who needs a counselor would take her in, there would be nothing preventing a deep peace from abiding in each house. Nations wouldn't be attacking each other, and armies wouldn't be engaging in battle. Neither would weapons be forged, if fasting ruled. There would be no point in holding court, prisons would be unpopulated, and evildoers wouldn't have a place to hide. If slanderers were found in the cities, they would be thrown into the sea.

If all were disciples of fasting, to echo the words of Job, there wouldn't be heard any "voice of the taskmaster." If fasting ruled our life, it wouldn't be full of groaning and sorrow.

It's clear that fasting would not only teach self-control in relation to all kinds of foods, but also how to entirely escape and get rid of covetousness, greed, and all kinds of evil. Having been set free, nothing would hinder deep peace and calmness of soul from accompanying our lives.

6. But now those who have dismissed fasting and pursued after indulgence to make life happy, have instead found that swarms of evils have been introduced, and their own bodies are perishing anyway.

Pay attention with me to the difference in how the faces will appear to you this evening and tomorrow. Observing them today, they are somewhat reddish, wet with a little sweat, their eyes are watery and drooping, and a kind of mistiness seems to have taken over the

clarity of their inward senses. But tomorrow they will have become quiet and solemn, the skin natural-looking, filled with meditation. The inner senses will be keen, since they have not had occasion to be darkened by physical exertions.

Fasting is the likeness of the angels, the tent-companion of the righteous, the moderation of life. It made the divine Mosaic Law. Samuel is the fruit of fasting. Hannah was fasting when she prayed to God: "O sovereign Lord, God of hosts, if you will look upon your servant, and give me a male child, I will give him to you as a dedicated gift. Wine and liquor he will surely not drink, until the day he dies."

Fasting brought about the great Samson, and brought him up until the time when he appeared publicly before men. Enemies were falling by the thousands, and many of their cities were being torn up, and lions were yielding to the strength of his hands. But when he came under the power of drinking and took up with harlots, he was easy prey for his enemies. He was bereaved of his eyes, and he was set out as a plaything for the children of foreigners.

After Elijah fasted he closed up the heavens three years and six months. After he saw how much wantonness had been born from the people's fullness, he thought it necessary to bring an involuntary fast upon them by means of famine. Through that he stood, while their excessive sins were already poured out, and fasting created such a burning, and cutting down of their evil leaders in pieces.

7. Receive her, poor common laborers, as your living companion and table partner. Slaves, you who hold the household together, receive her as a rest from your toils. You rich, receive her because she is curing you from the damage of excess. When she has worked her change in you, your daily life will be more pleasant, lived by the way of wisdom. You who are sick, receive her as the mother of health. You who are in good health, receive her as your prescribed good medicine.

Ask the doctors and they'll report it to you, that it's the most dangerous of all to be at the peak of health. So even the most experienced should deprive themselves of overindulgence, so as not to start secretly weeping for the power of the burden of fleshiness. For when they have purged the excess by firm purpose and through austerity, they prepare some open space for education, and a second beginning for promoting the power of growth. So it will have all kinds of bodily benefits for every activity, and it will go along well in houses and fields, by night and by day, in cities and wilderness.

So now, at such a time as this, let's receive her graciously and joyously into our homes for our own good. Let's obey the word of the Lord and not be like the gloomy-faced hypocrites, but rather just letting the simple brightness of the soul show clearly.

And I suppose it's not really necessary for me to preach about the challenge of fasting, about how today should not be given over to the evils of drunkenness. Most of you receive fasting into your homes again as a habit, showing respect to yourself and one

another. But I fear that the wine-lovers will try to rescue drunkenness, like an inheritance from their fathers.

It's as foolish to buy wine before five days of fasting, as it would be for those who are setting off on a long journey abroad. Who is so stupid that before even beginning to drink, he irrationally thinks about the things of drunkenness? Don't you know that a stomach won't safely care for what is entrusted to it? The stomach is a very unfaithful partner. It leaves the treasury unguarded. However many things you put away there, hoping to preserve them, it of course doesn't take care of them.

See to it that tomorrow, when you have come away from being drunk, the Lord doesn't have to say, "I haven't chosen this kind of fast." Why do you dilute pure things? What communion has fasting with drinking? What fellowship does self-control have with drunkenness? "What concord has the temple of God with idols?"

Those whom the Spirit of God indwells are God's temple. But those who let drunkenness bring the refuse of intemperance into their lives are a temple of idols. Today is the gateway of the fast days. But surely the one who has profaned the front doors is not worthy to enter into the holy places.

No household slave who wants to win the favor of his master becomes friends with the champion of his enemy. Drunkenness is an enemy of God, but fasting is the beginning of repentance. So if you want to come near to God through confession, flee drunkenness, so that the loss will not be made more difficult for you.

So let's not be selfish as we begin the abstinence from foods that is the noble fast. Let's fast in an acceptable manner, one that's pleasing to God. A true fast is one that is set against evil, it's self-control of the tongue. It's the checking of anger, separation from things like lusts, evil-speaking, lies, and false oaths. Self-denial from these things is a true fast, so fasting from these negative things is good. But on the positive side, let's delight in the Lord, being in pursuit of the words of the Spirit. And let's delight in taking up the laws of salvation, and in all the doctrines that restore our souls.

Therefore let's guard the fast from these things in secret. The prophet also rejects these things, saying, "The Lord will not let the soul of the righteous go hungry," and, "I have not seen the righteous forsaken, or his descendants looking for bread." Now this isn't speaking about literal bread, such as what the children of our patriarch Jacob went down into Egypt for. Rather, it's talking about spiritual food, the kind that goes inside us and perfects a person.

May the fasting threatened against the Jews not also come upon us: "For behold, days are coming, says the Lord, and I will bring upon this land a famine, not a famine of bread, neither thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the word of the Lord." The righteous judge brought this upon them because their minds were suffering from hunger and in a state of atrophy without true teaching, and their bodies were growing fat and weighed

down with flesh. So you should entertain the Holy Spirit joyfully every day without exception, both in the mornings and evenings.

No one should be left behind willingly from the spiritual feasting. Let's all share from this wineless bowl together. Wisdom has set it before us equally, and a special place for it has been set aside. "She has mixed her own bowl, and has slaughtered her own sacrifices." This refers to the food of the mature, "Who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil." Once we have thoroughly taken our fill, may we also be found worthy of the exhilaration that comes in the bridal chamber of Christ Jesus our Lord! To him be the glory and the power forever! Amen.