

Date: March 17, 2024  
Subject: Cheesefare Sunday

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

On Monday, we start the fast. May God bless and strengthen our fasting efforts for the betterment of our spiritual condition.

**MATTHEW 6: 14-21**

*For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you:  
But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.  
Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.  
But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face;  
That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.  
Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal:  
But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:  
For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*

Great Lent starts on Monday. The Gospel passage given to us on Sunday discusses three issues that we should be thinking about in order to make our fasting efforts truly beneficial. These are: forgiving each other, correctly fasting, and gathering true treasures in our hearts. Let us look more deeply into each one of these separately.

***1. For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.***

An interesting paradox in our lives is, that while we notice immediately when someone offends or hurts us, we fail to notice the numerous times that we offend God. The Church warns us that we, in fact, trespass against God many times everyday, often without realizing it. But when someone hurts us, we notice this very quickly and are greatly offended. At times, we carry that hurt for an extended period of time, and strive to get even. And in doing so, often we feel justified to use measures that even greatly exceed the hurt that we received.

But our God, a loving and merciful God, wants the salvation of all people. Therefore, knowing how hard it is for us to accept that we must not seek vengeance, He offers us a great measure of mercy. No matter how many times and how severely we transgress against Him and His commandments, He is ready to forgive absolutely everything that we have done. However, to receive this incredible mercy, what we need to do is to forgive completely everything that anyone has done to us.

We might question how it is possible for God to do this? And how is it possible for us to forgive our enemies with no retribution for our suffering? The answer to both questions is found in one word, love. Not the kind of love that the world teaches, but the true, divine love that God possesses and wants us to strive for. How can we weak people, reach such a level of love? Through repentance and prayer. We repent for our weakness and pray to God for spiritual

strength. And we also sincerely pray for the people that hurt us. Doing this releases abundantly the stream of God's grace on us, which makes us god-like. Becoming god-like guarantees us entry into Christ's blessed eternity.

***2. When ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast.***

Through this statement, God is instructing us on the correct way to fast. We need to determine whether we are fasting in order to be closer to God, or are we fasting for self-glorification? If we fast in order to showcase to people our piety, then we are suffering from vanity which is a great sin. In this case, our fasting is not only in vain, it hurts us spiritually.

But if we are fasting because we understand that we are spiritually weak and are in need of God's help, our fast is a correct and beneficial one. It reveals our humility and gives us grace. Scripture confirms this truth, that God resists those who are proud and gives grace only to the humble. Without grace, we are unable to do anything spiritually well. We are, therefore, in danger of losing salvation. How is it possible to be saved if we find ourselves in opposition to our Savior, the source-giver of salvation?

***3. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.***

The heart is not only the organ that pumps our blood through our whole body to feed all the organs of our body. It is also a vital spiritual organ which God wishes to make into His home. Through Scripture, the Lord gives us this request: *My son, give me your heart*. If we want to give our heart to God, we must make it spotlessly clean and fill it with our treasures. Only then it can be the kind of home in which the Lord will want to live.

How then can we best prepare? We wash away all the dirty spots which stain our hearts through sincere repentance. All sins, no matter how small or large, must be removed, as they are repulsive to God. He will not remain in a dirty house. Then, we must decorate our clean heart with our treasures. What are our treasures? They are the acts of piety that we collect through a righteous life.

Our acts are pious acts only if we do them out of love according to God's commandments. Christ confirms in Scripture that if we desire to love Him, we must obey His commandments. This is how we manifest our love for Him and our neighbor. And isn't that the purpose of Great Lent? Don't we devote the days of Great Lent to repentance and prayer? Therefore, let us on Monday begin our efforts and persevere all the way to Pascha. What great joy will the resurrected Savior implant into our hearts if we do this!

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, one often hears people complaining about the difficulties of Great Lent. Their claim is that this fast is too long and too hard to endure. But if we stop and think about it more deeply, we would actually greet the start of the fast with anticipation and profound joy, realizing why the Church texts repeatedly call it the springtime of the soul.

Through this, the Church is reminding us that the difficulties that we experience during Great Lent are actually a great blessing. They free our hearts and souls from the heavy sinful baggage that we collect during the year. And at the end of the fast, we will witness the most-joyous sight of all, the Savior resurrecting from the tomb. How can that not spiritually thrill us!

Therefore, let us compare our discomfort to the Savior's great suffering. This will confirm that our minor discomfort is actually a great blessing, which enables us to understand and appreciate the great love and mercy that our wonderful God has for us, His creatures. Indeed, Great Lent is a springtime for our souls!

In closing, I ask you to forgive me for any wrong thing that I may have done to you. And I wish you a most profitable Great Lent, followed by a truly joyous Pascha.

With Great Love in Christ,  
Archpriest Serge Kotar