

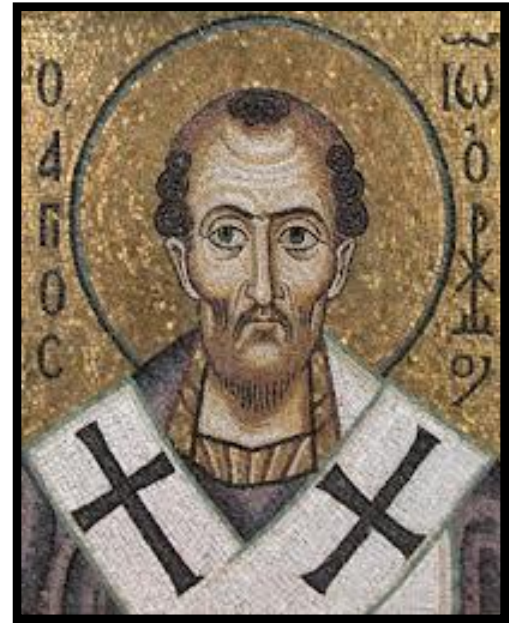
Saint John Chrysostom *On Fasting*

“Let the mouth too fast from disgraceful speeches and railing. For what does it profit if we abstain from birds and fishes; and yet bite and devour our brethren? The evil speaker eats the flesh of his brother, and bites the body of his neighbor.”

Excerpt from Homily 3 *On the Statutes*

Let us not then despair of our safety, but let us pray; let us make invocation; let us supplicate; let us go on embassy to the King that is above with many tears! We have this fast too as an ally, and as an assistant in this good intercession. Therefore, as when the winter is over and the summer is appearing, the sailor draws his vessel to the deep; and the soldier burnishes his arms, and makes ready his steed for the battle; and the husbandman sharpens his sickle; and the traveller boldly undertakes a long journey, and the wrestler strips and bares himself for the contest. So too, when the fast makes its appearance, like a kind of spiritual summer, let us as soldiers burnish our weapons; and as husbandmen let us sharpen our sickle; and as sailors let us order our thoughts against the waves of extravagant desires; and as travellers let us set out on the journey towards heaven; and as wrestlers let us strip for the contest. For the believer is at once a husbandman, and a sailor, and a soldier, a wrestler, and a traveller. Hence St. Paul says, We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers. Put on therefore the whole armour of God. Ephesians 6:12 Have you observed the wrestler? Have you observed the soldier? If you are a wrestler, it is necessary for you to engage in the conflict naked. If a soldier, it behooves you to stand in the battle line armed at all points. How then are both these things possible, to be naked, and yet not naked; to be clothed, and yet not clothed! How? I will tell you. Divest yourself of worldly business, and you have become a wrestler. Put on the spiritual armour, and you have become a soldier. Strip yourself of worldly cares, for the season is one of wrestling. Clothe yourself with the spiritual armour, for we have a heavy warfare to wage with demons. Therefore also it is needful we should be naked, so as to offer nothing that the devil may take hold of, while he is wrestling with us; and to be fully armed at all points, so as on no side to receive a deadly blow. Cultivate your soul. Cut away the thorns. Sow the word of godliness. Propagate and nurse with much care the fair plants of divine wisdom, and you have become a husbandman. And Paul will say to you, The husbandman that labours must be first partaker of the fruits. He too himself practised this art. Therefore writing to the Corinthians, he said, I have planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. 1 Corinthians 3:6 Sharpen your sickle, which you have blunted through gluttony—sharpen it by fasting. Lay hold of the pathway which leads towards heaven; rugged and narrow as it is, lay hold of it, and journey on. And how may thou be able to do these things? By subduing your body, and bringing it into subjection. For when the way grows narrow, the corpulence that comes of gluttony is a great hindrance. Keep down the waves of inordinate desires. Repel the tempest of evil thoughts. Preserve the bark; display much skill, and you have become a pilot. But we shall have the fast for a groundwork and instructor in all these things.

I speak not, indeed, of such a fast as most persons keep, but of real fasting; not merely an abstinence from meats; but from sins too. For the nature of a fast is such, that it does not suffice to deliver those who practise it, unless it be done according to a suitable law. For the wrestler, it is said, is not crowned unless he strive lawfully. 2 Timothy 2:5 To the end then, that when we have gone through the labour of fasting, we forfeit not the crown of fasting, we should understand how, and after what manner, it is necessary to conduct this business; since that Pharisee also fasted, Luke 18:12 but afterwards went down empty, and destitute of the fruit of fasting. The Publican fasted not; and yet he was accepted in preference to him who had fasted; in order that you may learn that fasting is unprofitable, except all other duties follow with it. The Ninevites fasted, and won the favour of God. Jonah 3:10 The Jews, fasted too, and profited nothing, nay, they departed with blame. Since then the



danger in fasting is so great to those who do not know how they ought to fast, we should learn the laws of this exercise, in order that we may not run uncertainly, nor beat the air, nor while we are fighting contend with a shadow. Fasting is a medicine; but a medicine, though it be never so profitable, becomes frequently useless owing to the unskilfulness of him who employs it. For it is necessary to know, moreover, the time when it should be applied, and the requisite quantity of it; and the temperament of body that admits it; and the nature of the country, and the season of the year; and the corresponding diet; as well as various other particulars; any of which, if one overlooks, he will mar all the rest that have been named. Now if, when the body needs healing, such exactness is required on our part, much more ought we, when our care is about the soul, and we seek to heal the distempers of the mind, to look, and to search into every particular with the utmost accuracy.

Let us see then how the Ninevites fasted, and how they were delivered from that wrath— Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything, Jonah 3:7 says (the prophet). What do you say? Tell me— must even the irrational things fast, and the horses and the mules be covered with sackcloth? Even so, he replies. For as when, at the decease of some rich man, the relatives clothe not only the men servants and maid servants, but the horses also with sackcloth, and give orders that they should follow the procession to the sepulchre, led by their grooms; thus signifying the greatness of the calamity, and inviting all to pity; thus also, indeed, when that city was about to be destroyed, even the irrational nature was enveloped in sackcloth, and subjected to the yoke of fasting. It is not possible, says he, that irrational creatures should learn the wrath of God by means of reason; let them be taught by means of fasting, that this stroke is of divine infliction. For if the city should be overturned, not only would it be one common sepulchre for us, the dwellers therein, but for these likewise. Inasmuch then as these would participate in the punishment, let them also do so in the fast. But there was yet another thing which they aimed at in this act, which the prophets also are wont to do. For these, when they see some dreadful chastisement proceeding from heaven, and those who are to be punished without anything to say for themselves—laden with shame—unworthy of the least pardon or excuse:— not knowing what to do, nor from whence they may procure an advocacy for the condemned, they have recourse to the things irrational; and describing their death in tragical fashion, they make intercession by them, putting forward as a plea their pitiable and mournful destruction. When therefore, aforetime, famine had seized upon the Jews, and a great drought oppressed their country, and all things were being consumed, one of the prophets spoke thus, The young heifers leaped in their stalls; the herds of oxen wept, because there was no pasture; all the cattle of the field looked upward to You, because the streams of waters were dried up. Joel 1:17 Another prophet bewailing the evils of drought again speaks to this effect: The hinds calved in the fields and forsook it, because there was no grass. The wild asses stood in the forests; they snuffed up the wind like a dragon; their eyes did fail, because there was no grass. Jeremiah 14:5 Moreover, you have heard Joel saying today, Let the bridegroom go forth of his chamber, and the bride out of her closet;— the infants that suck the breast. For what reason, I ask, does he call so immature an age to supplication? Is it not plainly for the very same reason? For since all who have arrived at the age of manhood, have inflamed and provoked God's wrath, let the age, says he, which is devoid of transgressions supplicate Him who is provoked.

But, as I said before, we may see what it was that dissolved such inexorable wrath. Was it, forsooth, fasting only and sackcloth? We say not so; but the change of their whole life. Whence does this appear? From the very language of the prophet. For he who has discoursed of the wrath of God, and of their fasting, himself too, when speaking of the reconciliation, and teaching us the cause of the reconciliation, speaks to this effect; And God saw their works. Jonah 3:10 What kind of works? That they had fasted? That they had put on sackcloth? Nothing of the sort: but passing all these points in silence, he adds, That they turned every one from their evil ways, and the Lord repented of the evil that He had said He would do unto them. Do you see, that fasting did not rescue from this danger, but it was the change of life, which rendered God propitious and kind to these barbarians?

I have said these things, not that we may disparage fasting, but that we may honour fasting; for the honour of fasting consists not in abstinence from food, but in withdrawing from sinful practices; since he who limits his fasting only to an abstinence from meats, is one who especially disparages it. Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works! Is it said by what kind of works? If you see a poor man, take pity on him! If you see in enemy,

be reconciled to him! If you see a friend gaining honour, envy him not! If you see a handsome woman, pass her by! For let not the mouth only fast, but also the eye, and the ear, and the feet, and the hands, and all the members of our bodies. Let the hands fast, by being pure from rapine and avarice. Let the feet fast, by ceasing from running to the unlawful spectacles. Let the eyes fast, being taught never to fix themselves rudely upon handsome countenances, or to busy themselves with strange beauties. For looking is the food of the eyes, but if this be such as is unlawful or forbidden, it mars the fast; and upsets the whole safety of the soul; but if it be lawful and safe, it adorns fasting. For it would be among things the most absurd to abstain from lawful food because of the fast, but with the eyes to touch even what is forbidden. Do you not eat flesh? Feed not upon lasciviousness by means of the eyes. Let the ear fast also. The fasting of the ear consists in refusing to receive evil speakings and calumnies. You shall not receive a false report, it says.

Let the mouth too fast from disgraceful speeches and railing. For what does it profit if we abstain from birds and fishes; and yet bite and devour our brethren? The evil speaker eats the flesh of his brother, and bites the body of his neighbour. Because of this Paul utters the fearful saying, If you bite and devour one another, take heed that you be not consumed one of another. Galatians 5:15 You have not fixed your teeth in the flesh, but you have fixed the slander in the soul, and inflicted the wound of evil suspicion; you have harmed, in a thousand ways, yourself and him, and many others, for in slandering a neighbour you have made him who listens to the slander worse; for should he be a wicked man, he becomes more careless when he finds a partner in his wickedness; and should he be a just man, he is lifted to arrogance, and puffed up; being led on by the sin of others to imagine great things concerning himself. Besides, you have struck at the common welfare of the Church; for all those who hear not only accuse the supposed sinner, but the reproach is fastened on the Christian community; neither do you hear the unbelievers saying, Such a person is a fornicator, or a libertine; but instead of the individual who has sinned, they accuse all Christians. In addition to this, you have caused the glory of God to be blasphemed; for as His Name is glorified when we have good report, so when we sin, it is blasphemed and insulted!

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And in the meanwhile I desire to fix three precepts in your mind, to the end that you may accomplish me these during the fast,— viz. to speak ill of no one; to hold no one for an enemy; and to expel from the mouth altogether the evil custom of oaths. And as when we hear that some money tax is imposed, each one going within, and calling his wife and children and servants, considers and consults with them how he may pay this tribute, so also let us do with respect to these spiritual precepts. Let every one when he has returned home call together his wife and children, and let him say, that a spiritual tribute was imposed this day: a tribute by which there will be some deliverance and removal of these evils; a tribute which does not make those who pay it poor, but richer; that is to say, to have no enemy, to speak evil of no man, and to swear not at all. Let us consider; let us think; let us resolve how we may fulfill these precepts. Let us exert every endeavour. Let us admonish each other. Let us correct each other, that we may not go to the other world as debtors, and then, needing to borrow of others, suffer the fate of the foolish virgins, and fall from immortal salvation. If we thus set our lives in order, I warrant you and promise, that from this there will be deliverance from the present calamity, and a removal of these dreadful ills; and what is greater than all, there will be the enjoyment of the good things to come. For it were fitting that I should commit to you the whole body of virtue; but I think it the best method of correction, to take the laws by parts, and reduce them to practice, and then to proceed to others. For as in a given field, the husbandman, digging it all up piecemeal, gradually comes to the end of his task; so we too if we make this rule for ourselves, in any wise to reduce to a correct practice these three precepts during the present Lent, and to commit them to the safe custody of good habit, we shall proceed with greater ease to the rest; and by this means arriving at the summit of spiritual wisdom, we shall both reap the fruit of a favourable hope in the present life; and in the life to come we shall stand before Christ with great confidence, and enjoy those unspeakable blessings; which, God grant, we may all be found worthy of, through the grace and loving kindness of Jesus Christ our Lord, with Whom be glory to the Father and the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.