

St. Basil the Great's First Homily on Fasting
translated by Kent Burghuis

*Our Holy Father Basil, Archbishop of Caesarea, Cappadocia.
On Fasting (De jejunio), Sermon 1.*

1. "Sound the trumpet," he declares, "in the new moon, on the high day of your feast." This command is from the prophets. But it's for us, too. The reading indicates the beginning of the feast days, and to us every trumpet is louder, and every musical instrument clearer.

For we have come to know the gift of the fasts of Isaiah. While the Jewish manner of fasting has been set aside, a true fast has been handed down to us. Don't "fast unto judgment and strife," but "loose every chain of injustice." And the Lord says: "Don't be like the gloomy-faced, but wash your face and anoint your head." Therefore let's agree, as it has been taught, that we won't be looking gloomy on the days that are approaching. Rather, we will cheerfully, agreeably look forward to them, as is fitting for saints.

No one is passionless when he is receiving a victory crown! No one is gloomy when a victory monument is being erected for him. Don't make being healed gloomy! It's outrageous that you don't rejoice over the health of your soul, but grieve over changing foods. You appear to be giving more favors to the pleasure of your stomach than to the care of your soul.

While getting filled up does a favor for the stomach, fasting returns benefits to the soul. Be encouraged, because the doctor has given you a powerful remedy for sin. Strong, powerful medicines can get rid of annoying worms that are living in the bowels of children. Fasting is like that, as it cuts down to the depths, venturing into the soul to kill sin. It is truly fitting to call it by this honorable name of medicine.

2. "Anoint your head, and wash your face." The word calls to you in a mystery. What is anointed is christened; what is washed is cleansed. Transfer this divine law to your inner life. Thoroughly wash the soul of sins. Anoint your head with a holy oil, so that you may be a partaker of Christ, and then go forth to the fast.

"Don't darken your face like the hypocrites." A face is darkened when the inner disposition is feigned, arranged to obscure it to the outside, like a curtain conceals what is false.

An actor in the theater puts on the face of another. Often one who is a slave puts on the face of a master, and a subject puts on royalty. This also happens in life. Just as in the production cast of one's own life many act on the stage. Some things are borne in the heart, but others are shown to men for the sake of appearances. Therefore don't darken your face. Whatever kind it is, let it show.

Don't disfigure yourself toward gloominess, or be chasing after the glory of appearing temperate. Not even almsgiving is of any profit when it is trumpeted, and neither is fasting that is done for publicity of any value. Ostentatious things don't bear fruit that lasts through the coming ages, but return back in the praises of men.

So run to greet the cheerful gift of the fast. Fasting is an ancient gift, but it is not worn out and antiquated. Rather, it is continually made new, and still is coming into bloom.

3. Do you think I am finding the ancient origin of fasting from the law? Fasting is even older than the law. If you will tolerate me a little while, you will find the truth from the word. Don't think that the Day of Atonement, commanded to Israel in the seventh month, the tenth day of the month, was the beginning of fasting.

Indeed, come on and walk through the history, investigating its ancient origins. For the invention isn't new. It's an heirloom from the fathers. Everything of such great antiquity deserves respect for its importance. Show some respect for the gray head of fasting!

Fasting is as old as mankind itself. It was given as a law in paradise. The first commandment Adam received was: "From the tree of the knowledge of good and evil do not eat." Now this command, "do not eat," is the divine law of fasting and temperance. If Eve had fasted from the tree, we would not have to keep this fast now.

The strong don't need a doctor, but the sick do. We were made sick through sin; let's be healed through repentance. But repentance without fasting is ineffective. "For the earth is cursed, thorns and briars rise up to you." You see, enduring pain has been prescribed for you, not delicate living.

Through fasting satisfaction is made to God. But the way of life of fasting in paradise is also an image, as people were sharing the life of angels. Even more than that, through contentment with little, humanity's likeness to the angels would have been established. But also because whatever kinds of diet human inventiveness later discovered, those in paradise had not yet come to understand. There wasn't the drinking of wine yet, nor the eating of meat, nor anything clouding the human mind.

4. Since we did not fast, we fell from paradise. Well, now let's fast, so that we may go back again. Remember Lazarus, how through fasting he entered into paradise? Don't imitate Eve's disobedience; don't again receive counsel from the serpent. That's how we were made subject to fleshly food. Don't make weakness of the body and illness a pretext. You aren't pretending to me, but you are talking to the One who knows.

Tell me, aren't you able to fast? But you're able to be filled up with this life, and to afflict the body with the weight of the things being eaten? Indeed, I know that doctors have ordered even sick people to abstain and go hungry, rather than eat all kinds of foods. How come somebody like that is able to do these things, but you pretend you aren't able to do that?

What's easier to the stomach? A plain diet that carries you through the night, or rich foods that weigh you down like a rock when you lie down? But even more than troubling you when you lie down, doesn't it frequently turn on you like an enemy, tearing through and causing you stomach contractions?

You would surely agree that the pilot of a merchant ship is better able to safely guide it to port if it is not fully loaded, when it is in excellent condition and light. The ship completely loaded down is sunk by a minor swell in the waters. But the boat that has a captain smart enough to toss overboard the extra weight will ride high above even surging waves.

That's like people in burdened down bodies. A person gets absorbed with filling up, getting weighed down until finally falling into ill health. But those who are well-equipped, light, and truly nourished, avoid the prospect of serious disease. They are like the boat in stormy weather that goes right over a dangerous rock.

Contrast that with how relaxation from running, or taking a break from aging, actually makes you more miserable. But, you say, it is more fitting that those who are sick eat well, rather than a plain diet. However, the ability that governs the animal takes care of it through a plain diet and produces contentedness, and it learns to like being nourished. But if an animal is given expensive, exotic foods, it won't be satisfied in the end, and may even get all kinds of diseases.

5. But let the word walk you through history, passing through the antiquity of fasting. All the saints have protected it, like an inheritance passed down from the fathers. They in turn passed it down, like a father passing something down to a child. So we are the successors of this long line, and this possession has been entrusted to us.

Wine wasn't in paradise; there was not yet any slaughtering of animals, not yet any eating of meat. After the flood there was wine. After the flood, "you will eat all kinds of things, like you eat vegetables that grow from the ground." When perfection was despaired, then the enjoyment of those things was allowed.

Now the wine is an example of inexperience, as Noah was ignorant of the use of wine. For it had not yet come into use in life, neither been known in human custom. Since he had neither seen another do it, nor tried it himself, he was unguardedly hurt by it. "For Noah planted a vineyard, and he drank from the fruit, and he got drunk." He wasn't out-of-control drunk, he just wasn't aware of the potent thing he was consuming.

So the invention of wine drinking is younger than paradise, and the dignity of fasting is established as being even more ancient. But we have also been taught about the fasting of Moses when he came onto the mountain. He wouldn't have boldly faced the smoking summit, neither would he have had the courage to enter into the thick cloud, if he hadn't been completely armed with fasting. Through fasting he received the commandments from the finger of God written on the tablets.

And while up above the divine law was being received with fasting, down below gluttony was disgorging itself into idolatry. “For the people sat down to eat and drink, and they got up to play.” Forty days devoted to fasting and waiting were made useless by one bout of drunkenness.

Fasting received the tablets written by finger of God, but drunkenness shattered them. The drunken crowd was judged unworthy to receive the divine law from the prophet of God. In one moment of time those people, who had been taught by the greatest miracle of God, were dragged off into Egyptian idolatry by their gluttonous inclination. Both of the arrangements are parallel— how fasting brings near to God, and how luxury betrays salvation.

Come walk on down to later times.

6. What did Esau throw away, and so was made a slave of his brother? Didn't he sell his rights as first-born for a single meal? By contrast, wasn't it with fasting and prayer that Hannah was favored to become the mother of Samuel?

What great meal brought into being the invincible Samson? Wasn't it fasting, with which he was conceived in the womb of his mother? Fasting conceived him, fasting nursed him, fasting made a man of him. The angel commanded his mother, “He must certainly not eat anything that comes from the vineyard, and he must certainly not drink wine or liquor.”

Fasting gives birth to prophets; it strengthens the powerful. Fasting makes lawmakers wise. It is a safeguard of a soul, a stabilizing companion to the body, a weapon for the brave, a discipline for champions. Fasting knocks over temptations, anoints for godliness. It is a companion of sobriety, the crafter of a sound mind. In wars she fights bravely, in peace it teaches tranquility. It sanctifies the Nazirite, and it perfects the priest.

How the law was introduced is figurative for true, mystical worship. One is not able to boldly face the divine presence without fasting. It made Elijah an observer of that marvelous vision. His soul was purified by fasting forty days, so that in the cave on Mt. Horeb he was considered worthy to see the Lord like one sees a man.

By fasting he returned the widow's child to her—he became stronger than death through fasting! While fasting, a cry went out from his mouth that closed up the heavens for three years and six months from the lawbreaking people. In order that the unbroken heart of the stubborn might be softened, he himself also took on the suffering of being condemned.

On account of this he said, “As the Lord lives, there will not be water on the land, except through my mouth.” And he laid on all the people a fast through the famine, so that the evil effects from their self-indulgence and unrestrained life might be corrected.

And what about the life of Elisha? How from the lodging place of the Shunemite he was driven away? And how he himself entertained the prophets? Wasn't he completely hospitable with wild vegetables and a little flour? When the poisonous gourd was added,

those who had come in contact with it were about to be in danger. But the poison was neutralized by the prayer of fasting.

Once fasting was discovered, all the saints were led by the hand into the divine way of life. There is a certain kind of substance, that the Greeks call *amianton*, that is impervious to fire. When it is placed in the flame, it seems to be made of coal, but when it comes up out of the fire, it is cleaner than if it had been washed in water. That's what the bodies of those three children were like; they had bodies of *amianton* from fasting in Babylonia. For in the great fiery furnace, their nature being like gold, was then demonstrated to be superior when they were drawn from the fire unhurt.

Here's how their nature was demonstrated to be stronger than gold: the fire did not refine them, but simply preserved their sincerity. When they had not yet even been cast into the fire, the flames were being fed naphtha and pitch and branches, and they streamed out above the furnace forty-nine cubits, so that many of the Chaldeans standing near it were destroyed. Then, with fasting, when they were cast into the conflagration, they were able to walk around on their own feet, and they were breathing a little moistened air in the torrent of fire. And the fire didn't even damage their hair, because they had been strengthened by fasting.

7. Now Daniel (fasted) from desire, and went without eating bread or drinking water for three weeks. And when he was thrown down in their den, he taught the lions to fast! When one material strikes another, one is harder than the other, like bronze is harder than stone. Just so, the lions weren't able to sink their teeth into him. Fasting is like sharpening the edges of a man by dipping his body in iron—it makes him tougher than lions! They couldn't open their mouths against the saint.

Fasting quenches the power of fire; it closes the mouths of lions. Fasting sends prayer up into heaven, becoming like wings for its upward journey. Fasting is the increase of houses, the mother of health. It's an instructor of youth, an adornment to the old. It's a good companion for traveling, a secure living companion to those dwelling together.

A husband doesn't suspect a plot against his marriage, and lives in harmony with his wife when he sees her fasting. A wife doesn't fall apart in jealousy, and happily accepts the husband she sees fasting.

Who makes his own house decline by fasting? Count the domestic benefits by considering the following things. No one has been deserted by those in the house on account of fasting. There's no crying over the death of an animal, certainly no blood. Certainly nothing is missed by not bringing an unmerciful stomach out against the creatures.

The knives of the cooks have stopped; the table is full enough with things growing naturally. The Sabbath was given to the Jews, so that "you will rest," it says, "your animal and your child." Fasting should become a rest for the household servants who slave away continually, all year long.

Give rest to your cook, give freedom to the table keeper, stay the hand of the cupbearer. For once put an end to all those manufactured meals! Let the house be still for once from the myriad disturbances, and from the smoke, and from the odor of burning fat, and from the running around up and down, and from serving the stomach as if it were an unmerciful mistress!

Even those who exact tribute sometimes give a little liberty to their subjects. The stomach should also give a vacation to the mouth! It should make a truce, a peace offering with us for five days. That stomach never stops demanding, and what it takes in today is forgotten tomorrow. Whenever it is filled, it philosophizes about abstinence; whenever it is emptied, it forgets those opinions.

8. Fasting doesn't know the nature of usury. The one who fasts doesn't smell of interest tables. The interest rates of fasting don't choke an orphan child's inheritance, like snakes curled around a neck. Quite otherwise, fasting is an occasion for gladness.

As thirst makes the water sweet, and coming to the table hungry makes what's on it seem pleasant, so also fasting heightens the enjoyment of foods. For once fasting has entered deep into your being, and the continuous delight of it has broken through, it will give you a desire that makes you feel like a traveler who wants to come home for fellowship again. Therefore, if you would like to find yourself prepared to enjoy the pleasures of the table, receive renewal from fasting.

But, if you are overcome by the excess of delights, without knowing yourself the unseen delights, by the love of pleasure the real pleasure is ruined.

That's not really desirable, because if the enjoyment doesn't last, it comes to be despised. But possessions that are rare are much sought after for their enjoyment. So, too, this possession of fasting intends to bring about an exchange in our life, so that the grace of what has been given to us might remain with us.

Don't you see, that also the sun shines more brightly after the night? And being awake is more pleasant after sleep? And health is more desirable after the experience of the opposite? A table is for that very reason more gratifying after fasting. It's like that both for the rich who live graciously, and for those with a simple and subsistence lifestyle.

9. You should be afraid of the example of the rich man. That which is delightful throughout life cast him into the fire. It wasn't unrighteousness, but delicate living that accused him, roasted him in the flames of the furnace. So for that reason, it is necessary that we have water to extinguish that fire.

We ought not fast only because of what is going to happen, but in this flesh it is even more profitable. Those at the peak of health can have a turnaround and change, their natures get bent down, and they are no longer able to carry the burden of full health.

See to it that you don't go spitting on the water you're drinking now, and like the rich man, afterward you desire a single drop. No one ever got a hangover from water. No head ever ached because it was burdened with water. No one's feet were ever bound by living with another who was a water drinker. No feet were bound, no hands ruined, because they were sprinkled with water.

It necessarily happens that those living luxuriously are working toward excessive diseases in their bodies, and their dissonance ripens for destruction.

One fasting has a healthy complexion, not breaking out in a shameless, blushing redness, but moderation is adorned with paleness. One fasting has a gentle eye, a calm gait, and a thoughtful face. There is no intemperate, arrogant laughter, but rather fitting speech, and purity of heart.

Remember the saints of old, "Of whom the world was not worthy, who went around in sheepskins, in goatskins, destitute, persecuted, mistreated." Remember their mode of life, if indeed you are seeking after the same inheritance as them.

What was it that caused Lazarus to wake up in the bosom of Abraham? Wasn't it fasting? John's life was one of fasting. He had no bed, no table, no fruitful piece of land, no plowing ox, no grain, no grinding and baking, nothing from the normal course of life. Because of this, "No one born of women has arisen greater than John the Baptist."

Like the others, fasting also marked Paul, who considered severe trials something to boast about, and he was caught up into the third heaven.

But above all that has been said, our Lord took flesh and fortified it with fasting on behalf of us. Then in that condition he welcomed the assault of the devil, teaching us to anoint and to train ourselves with fastings before struggling with temptations. So when he was wrestling in a state of need, an opportunity was given. The devil was not able to approach the Lord on account of the supernatural nature of his divinity, unless he came down to humanity through the state of need. However, when he had gone back into the heavens, he partook of the food of the nature of the resurrected body of the believer.

Doesn't it grieve you, that you are overgrown and fattened up? While the mind is wasting away of atrophy, not even a single word is spoken about the life-giving teaching of salvation? Don't you know, that just like when one army defeats the other, the flesh is handed over to the conquering spirit, and the spirit is changing the rank of the flesh to slavery? "These things are adversaries of each other." So if you want to make the mind strong, tame the flesh through fasting!

This is what the apostle said, that "however much the outer man is wasting away, so much the inner man is being renewed." And this: "Whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

Won't you despise destructive foods? Wouldn't you rather receive a desire for the table in the kingdom, that fasting here prepares beforehand? Don't you know that by excessive filling you are preparing for yourself a fat worm to torture you?

Who has received anything of the fellowship of the spiritual gifts by abundant food and continual luxury? Moses, when receiving the law a second time, needed to fast a second time, too. If the animals hadn't fasted together with the Ninevites, they wouldn't have escaped the threatened destruction.

Whose bodies fell in the desert? Wasn't it those who desired to eat flesh? While those same people were satisfied with manna and water from the rock, they were defeating Egyptians, they were traveling through the sea, and "sickness could not be found in their tribes? But when they remembered the pots of meat, they also turned back in their lusts to Egypt, and they did not see the Promised Land. Don't you fear this example? Don't you shudder at gluttony, lest you be shut out from the good things you are hoping for?

Neither would the wise Daniel have seen visions, if he had not illuminated his soul with fasting. From fatty foods what sooty vapors rise up, like a frequent, punishing cloud! The rays from the presence of the Holy Spirit can barely penetrate it to shine on the mind.

Now if there is even a certain kind of food for angels, it is bread, as the prophet says: "Man ate the bread of angels." It's neither flesh, nor wine, nor whatever those who are slaves to the stomach anxiously seek out.

Fasting is a weapon against the armies of demons: "For this kind doesn't go out except by prayer and fasting."

From fasting come so many good things, but fullness is the beginning of insolence. Immediately it rushes in together with the delicacy, and with drunkenness, and with all kinds of rich sauces. All kinds of licentious behaviors start grazing. After that, men become "lusty horses" toward women, because the luxury makes a maddening itch enter into the soul. Those who are drunks pervert themselves against nature, using a male like a female, or vice-versa.

But fasting even makes known how the proper boundaries of marriage work. The excesses of even things permitted by law are curtailed, introduced by agreement for an appropriate time, in order that the couple might be devoted to prayer.

10. But don't limit the goodness of fasting by abstaining only from foods. For true fasting is the enemy of evil. "Loose the chains of injustice!" Forgive your neighbor's offense, and forgive his debts. Don't "fast unto judgment and strife." You don't eat meat, but you eat your brother. You abstain from wine, but stubbornly hold on to insolence. You patiently wait until evening to partake, but you spend the day in court.

"Woe to those who are drunk, but not from wine!" Wrath is a drunkenness of the soul, making it senseless, like wine. Grief itself is also drunkenness, sinking down the mind.

Fear is another drunkenness, whenever it fears things that don't need to be feared. For he says, "from fear of my enemy, deliver my soul." Together, each of these passions, allowing the mind to be taken over and out of control, is rightly termed drunkenness.

Consider with me the one who is angry, how he is drunk with passion.

He isn't master of himself, he doesn't know himself, and he doesn't know who is standing around. He tries to hit everything, flailing all over, like somebody fighting in the dark. He declares that he is in control, he is hard to hold in, he reviles, he strikes, he threatens, he swears, he shouts, he curses.

Guard against this kind of drunkenness, but don't be given over to the kind that comes from wine, either. Don't start being a water-drinker just because you've been drinking too much. Don't let drunkenness initiate you into fasting. The entryway into fasting doesn't come through drunkenness. Neither is greed the entryway into justice, nor is intemperance the way to sound judgment. To sum it up, evil never leads to virtue. There is another door into fasting. Drunkenness leads to intemperance, but contentment opens the door to fasting.

The athlete practices before the contest. The one who fasts is practicing self-control ahead of time. Don't approach these five days like you are coming to rescue them as if they need you, or like somebody who is trying to get around the intent of the law, by just laying aside intoxication. If you do that, you are suffering in vain. You are mistreating the body, but not relieving its need.

This safe where you keep your valuables isn't secure; there are holes in the bottom of your wine-bottles. The wine at least leaks out, and runs down its own path; but sin remains inside.

A servant runs away from a master who beats him. So you keep staying with wine, even though it beats your head every day? The best measure of the use of wine is whether the body needs it. But if you happen to go outside of the bounds, tomorrow you will feel overloaded, gaping, dizzy, smelling rotten from the wine. To you, everything will be spinning around; everything will seem to be shaking. Drunkenness brings a sleep that's a brother of death, but even being awake seems like being in a dream.

11. So, do you know whom you are about to receive? He who promised us, that "I myself, and the Father, we will come and make our home with him." Why, then, would you get caught being drunk, and close the door against the Master? Why would you encourage the enemy to occupy your stronghold? Drunkenness doesn't make the Lord feel welcome; drunkenness chases away the Holy Spirit. For as smoke drives away bees, intoxication drives away the spiritual gifts.

Fasting is the proper decorum of a city, stability of the marketplace, peace of homes, saving of possessions. Do you want to see its dignity?

Compare with me today's evening to tomorrow, and you will see the city changed from its raging, surging sea into a deep tranquility. But I pray, that both today might be like tomorrow in dignity, and tomorrow might leave none of today's joyousness behind.

Now, may the Lord who brought us through to the coming around of the season, grant to us, as competitors in these preliminary contests, that we may display enduring firmness and vigor, to attain also the crowns on the decisive day; now, in memory of the saving passions, but in the coming ages, by the recompense to us of the things done in life, by the righteous judgment of his Christ; because the glory belongs to him forever! Amen.