

Do the things you can do, so that you can be given grace to do the things you cannot do.

Fasting in prison

When things are hard, taking it easy on ourselves does not make things easier.

Praying for others

Letter to a prisoner

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To: ...

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Dear in Christ ...: I was very edified by our meeting. May God allow many more. I want you to understand something about me, and, in general, Orthodox spirituality. I do not get too excited about things, or people. People can start poorly and finish well. They can have zeal, and then fall away. We must be realistic about our abilities and not reach beyond ourselves. The Lord will help with that!

We cannot do the things we cannot do, but struggling to do the things we CAN do will, with God's grace, cause a mountain to be moved (see Mat 17:14-21) – our sins, and we will learn to do things that are impossible for us now.

We cannot do some things – pray with full attention, control our thoughts, cease judging, pray with our heart, but with God all things are possible, and indeed WILL happen, but they will happen when we are ready, and will not suffer spiritual harm, if we allow them to happen in God's time. We continually should say "I am unworthy". In the same breath, the same thought, should also be: "and God is merciful and will help me". This is NOT in any way like the typical Christian ideas that float around our world, in prison, or even among unspiritual Orthodox Christians.

All this being said, my heart tells me that you can find peace in your heart, in the church. You must apply yourself, and listen to the things I tell you. Whether you can do them or not is not so important. Failure is a better teacher than success, especially early on. Have fire in your belly, but do not let this fire lead you to make your own spiritual decisions about things. This is not what the world teaches. This is not what TV evangelists teach. This is the Orthodox Christian way – the way of life.

I have stressed a few things with you. I want to review them. Remember the principle – "You must do the things you can do, so that you can be given grace to do the things you cannot do". It is a terrible sin if we are capable of something and do not do it, because of laziness, or indifference, or inattention. It is not as terrible a sin if we cannot do something, and therefore fail (although of course, we must try).

I will give some examples. None of these are meant to be personal or apply to you directly.

Perhaps a person cannot stop from judging someone, or being angry at them, or harboring bad thoughts about him. **He can, and he MUST** – pray for that person, daily.

Perhaps a person cannot be fully sexually pure. He cannot control his thoughts, or his eyes, and even falls into self-gratification. **He can – and He MUST** – repent of his sins, and pray specifically about them. Of course, **he can – and he MUST** – confess them and not make excuses for them.

Perhaps a person cannot always think about God, and pray without ceasing to Him. **He can – and he MUST** – fast from certain foods. It is easier to fast than to control our thoughts!

Regarding fasting, perhaps a person cannot fast according to the typikon (the rules of fasting). **He can – and he MUST** – refuse to make excuses for himself, talk to his confessor about his problem, and fast in SOME way. NO fasting whatsoever is a great sin, and will cause a person to make no progress in the spiritual life. Poor fasting, *with effort* and *repentance* can cause a person to make great progress in the spiritual life.

It is critical, for your well-being and spiritual growth, that you try to fast according to the Orthodox typikon, People with weak faith make excuses about their fasting. People with weak faith consider the church's fasting rules to be "legalism".

Such a person's arrogance and self-dependence will make him very weak in the spiritual life. The truth is, that the fasting rules can be modified –but not by the individual. We do not make our own medical or legal decisions! We also do not decide what is best to fast from, or to eat. If a person has weaknesses, the spiritual father adjusts his fasting rule. If we follow his advice, we fast according to our ability AND we are obedient, AND we humble ourselves. That is a trifecta!

I have told you to abstain from meat during fasting periods, and milk products, and eggs. This is difficult, but it can be done. Since you can make store, you should be buying a lot of peanut butter, and rice and beans. You can eat fish on the weekends. The latter would be a good idea, for protein consumption. I would not concern myself about oil. The oil used is poor quality in prisons, and they use it for everything, and it smells terrible (to me). If you like beans, or at least can eat them, you can easily trade your mystery meat and cake for more beans. People may think they are getting a better “deal” but you are getting the better deal – you are being mindful of God, and your fasting will help you to pray and conquer your passions. We will make adjustments if you communicate with me.

I think you have some endurance, so I will tell you something very useful: – when things are hard, taking it easy on ourselves does not make things easier. Grace is attracted to personal rigor, and effort, and fire in our belly. We should not try to go beyond our abilities – this leads to pride if the demons help us to succeed, or despondency and discouragement if we fail. On the other hand, we must do the things we CAN do. You will begin to know this in your heart.

Please read the Elder Cleopa's book “The truth of our faith, Volume 2, On the Christian Mysteries”. I have it in front of me, and will re-read it. We will discuss, via letter. Tell me something about chapter 1 – comments or questions.

Also tell me you have made a list of important people in your life – for good or bad reasons, and that you are praying for these people daily. I showed you a prostration from your knees, which is most useful when in the dorms, since anything new attracts people, and you want to be left alone when you pray. Prostrations are very useful for the soul. You can make the sign of the cross, and as you finish it, bow down so that your forehead touches the floor, then come back up. I have an arbitrary rule as to which people I prostrate for. Basically, it is everyone in my family, dear friends and benefactors, and whoever my heart feels has great need. Of course, by the latter criterion, I should do a thousand prostrations! One must be realistic.

You can say: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on ____” when you do the prostration. You could do this once for each person on your prostration list, or maybe 2 times, then say “Most holy Theotokos save ____”.

“Theotokos” is a very important Greek word. It means birth-giver of God. Mary, the Theotokos, did not give birth to a mere man -- there is nothing special about that. She gave birth to the God-man, Jesus Christ, and we emphasize this by calling her the birth-giver of God. Of course, God is not “born”, from a woman or anywhere else, as a creature comes from something else. God always was and is, but Jesus, in time, was born of a virgin, and from the time of the annunciation, when Mary became pregnant by the Holy Spirit, is fully God and fully man, two natures, unmixed, but united in one person.

Doing this stuff is a learned skill. If you have questions, ask me.

You have a “poor man's prayer rope” around your neck. Try to use it every day and say the Jesus prayer, one time for each bead, for your, your, and yourself.

This stuff is hard to do. Good habits are hard to form, and easy to break. Persist, and you will be amazed.

You owe me a letter, to tell your purpose in life. I will send my response, via postal mail. You should write yours before you read mine!

If you and ... find folk that want Orthodox services, I have something to bring to the chaplain, and I will come more often. This is enough for now, via jpay. There are many more letters to write!

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