

FASTING



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Yusuf's mother: "I am glad that you came to visit me. I believe the month of Ramadan is over now. Isn't it so?"

Abdallah's mother: Yes, we also celebrated the 'Eid on Friday. Do Christians also observe fasting?

Yousuf's mother: "Some do observe it and some do not."

Abdallah's mother: "Do you mean to say that Jesus never observed fasting?"

Yousuf's mother: "No, it is not so, the Holy Gospel mentions that our Lord Jesus Christ continuously fasted for forty days and forty nights while Satan tempted Him in the desert."

Abdallah's mother: Don't you people follow His example?"

Yousuf's mother: "Some of us do fast on those days when we remember the suffering that our Lord Jesus Christ endured for us. Many Christians fast in repentance in memory of the death of Jesus on the cross."

Abdallah's mother: "So you do not follow any rule in this regard? We, as a rule, observe the fast on all the days of the month of Ramadan. We must fast from dawn to the dusk and abstain from food and drink and sensual desires."

Yousuf's mother: "No. Our Lord Jesus did not prescribe any such rule. He did not tell us much about rules, but on the contrary he told us that in religious life such hypocritical restrictions are generally dangerous. He often said that by obeying too many rules, people become unaware of the condition of their hearts. It is because of this kind of misunderstanding that people consider themselves righteous and think that since they observe a few rules, they have become holy. Jesus Christ criticized the Pharisees on this issue."

Abdallah's mother: "Who were those people?"

Yousuf's mother: "In the land of Lord Jesus, such Jews who scrupulously observed the Law and the tradition were called Pharisees. They strictly observed

even the minutest rules of Jewish Law and felt that true religion means carefully observing a few regulations and that's all. They believed that if they observed the Law, God would be pleased with them and would be kind to them."

Abdallah's mother: "Then why did Jesus Christ criticize them?"

Yousuf's mother: Listen! First of all there was so much egotism in the Pharisees that whenever they fasted, they disfigured their faces and looked somber so that people may know that they are fasting. Leave aside putting oil on their head; they would not even wash their faces. They believed that people would praise them for their abstinence. Apparently though they observed the fast, their hearts were not serene."

Abdallah's mother: "They were certainly at fault. We were told that during the month of Ramadan, we must observe the fast with a sincere heart and remain pious otherwise the fast would go waste."

Yousuf's mother: "The greatest mistake of the Pharisees was their belief that they would obtain salvation by their deeds. They believed that fasting, prayer, charity and other good deeds will compel God to forgive their sins and secure a place for them in heaven. In fact, they had neglected the true condition of the human heart. They did not realize that one cannot overcome a disgusting thing like sin by observing religious duties."

Abdallah's mother: "Is it not true that we can obtain salvation by our deeds? I remember Abdallah's father often telling me about the tradition of the Prophet where it is said: "He, who observes the fasts of the month of Ramadan in faith and expects reward, will find all his previous sins forgiven." Don't you believe that by observing fasting, man can overcome his sins?"

Yousuf's mother: "No, we do not believe like this. The Holy Gospel clearly states that God alone can overcome our sins and save us, because as far as our good deeds are concerned, they are what God wants us to do. They cannot eradicate our past bad deeds. If our forgiveness and salvation were to depend on our own efforts i.e. our prayer, fasting and other good deeds, then definitely we could not reach the desired standard in doing them. Our best of all good deeds is never perfect and unselfish. Who can achieve salvation in such conditions? I cannot imagine that I

should depend on my weak and sinful nature for the forgiveness of my sins and salvation. But by the grace of God the Holy Gospel gives us the good news that I need not depend on myself, because God, in His mercy has sent Jesus Christ so that He grants us salvation from our sins. Do you remember what the angel had told Mary? He said that she should name her child, Jesus and the reason he gave for this was that 'He alone will save His people from sin.' The meaning of the word, 'Jesus' is 'the one who saves from sins.' How blessed is the name! The coming of Jesus meant that God Himself overcomes sin and freely grants salvation. That is the reason why Jesus' disciples did not fast while He was with them."

Abdallah's mother: "You mean to say that during the days of Jesus Christ, the disciples did not fast?"

Yousuf's mother: "That is right. They did not observe fasting. One day a few Jews came to Jesus and asked: 'Why your disciples do not fast?' He replied: 'Do you expect them to fast while I am still with them? See, how happy we are, just like the bridegroom and his wedding guests.' What Jesus meant by that is that as in the wedding, the guests are not made to fast, so also in the presence of the Saviour, they too do not fast. The presence of Jesus was like the joy of a wedding and His disciples considered themselves as guests in this banquet. Fasting is like depression due to sin and though the disciples of Jesus were depressed due to their sins, as the redeemer Himself was with them so they were happy. And same is the situation today. Our Lord, having been raised from the grave, is still with His disciples. Therefore people who accept Jesus in their heart have an unending stream of joy with them. Now tell me, where is the need for them to fast?"

Abdallah's mother: "Now I understand why people did not fast during the days of Jesus."

Yousuf's mother: "After the Lord Jesus Christ was lifted up alive to heaven and even today some of us do observe fasting as a part of worship because they feel that they can worship God in a better way if they deprive themselves of food and this provides spiritual strength to them. Under these conditions fasting is beneficial to them. For example, some people observe fasting so that it could help them in worship and prayer. But if one fasts only to conform to the Law and not from one's heart then we too will feel our physical hunger and like the Pharisees become

peevish and aggrieved about our fellow beings, and then of what use is such fasting?”

Abdallah’s mother: “You are right. If anyone fasts without knowing its spiritual merits, such a fast is of no use to him. Because fasting is deeply associated with spirituality. It is commanded that during the month of Ramadan we should meditate only on God’s Word. With our special prayers and regular attendance at the religious gatherings, we should keep on glorifying God who guided us to the straight path. Only through such means we can remove evil from our hearts.”

Yousuf’s mother: “In my opinion, it is better that we let God remove evil from our hearts. None of our deeds, even the fasting of the entire month can save us from sin and its punishment. But God in His mercy is able to do so and He has done so. God sent Jesus, the Saviour, to save our lives from sin and from the evil of death. His arrival and His life are the miracle of God’s love. Jesus died on the cross for our sake and rose again from the dead so that we too may die in our sins and live in His righteousness. These truths tell us which kind of fast is truly pleasing to God.”

Abdallah’s mother: “Which is that fast?”

Yousuf’s mother: “It is fasting of the heart. Apparent obedience of the Law is not called true fasting. Fasting is concerned with the heart. Many people who observe such type of fast do not fast in true sense. As against this, many people who do not merely starve their tummies are the ones who observe the fast in true sense because they fast from their heart. This means that, in fact, they serve God and mankind. God has revealed the meaning of true fast through one Jewish prophet in these words: “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?”(Isaiah 58:6-7)

Abdallah’s mother: “Truly the prophet has said a wise thing that instead of depriving ourselves of food it is better in the sight of God that we break the shackles of oppression and deprive ourselves of food to feed the hungry. Can you

tell me whether Jesus Christ has also described fasting in the same terms as the prophet had done?”

Yousuf’s mother: “Yes, our Lord Jesus Christ has revealed to us through His Word and life that true fasting is related to the heart i.e. to love God and the human beings. He never encouraged hypocrisy. He said that those who fast by depriving themselves of food and water must not reveal their distress nor deprive themselves of bath or oiling their hair. He always taught that one must fast in heart and spirit and that one must not fast on any particular day or month but should do so anytime. When we fast in our conscience, we must abstain from evil thoughts, evil speech and evil deeds along with the deprivation of food. In fact this is more important. Our hearts must be pure to worship God and they must also be full of love for the poor, the hungry and the afflicted. Don’t you understand that such fasting is pleasing to God?”

Abdallah’s mother: “Surely, such fast will be acceptable to God. But is it possible for a weak person to do so?”

Yousuf’s mother: “When we come to know that God, in His love through Jesus Christ, has saved us from sins and weaknesses then what remains to be done is to experience this truth spiritually. And once we have experienced, how God pours that love in our heart and how He works the salvation, then it becomes possible for us to observe such a fast and above all this is the fast which we all can observe joyfully. If you have faith in this, you too can fast in this way.”

Abdallah’s mother: I will never forget whatever you have told me but now I must leave. I hope you will soon pay a visit to me.”

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