

A Fast Acceptable and Pleasing to the Lord:  
Themes in the Lenten Weekday Services  
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Orthodox are familiar with the important themes of the Sundays of Great Lent. From the Sunday of Orthodoxy to St. Mary of Egypt, lenten Sundays are like road signs marking our progress, and nourishing our souls, in our annual journey toward Holy Pascha. We are much less conversant, however, with thematic threads that are woven into the weekday services. These threads, many and varied, weave a beautiful garment, like Joseph's coat of many colors, in which we are clothed during our lenten journey.

Here we present only a few of these threads, taken from the aposticha (short hymns at the end of Matins and Vespers). Each of the six weeks of lent has its own theme, which in most cases is acquired from an earlier time in Church history when they were continuations of the previous Sundays' themes. As the lenten liturgical life developed over the centuries, the Sunday themes changed, but many of the hymns remain as beautiful vestiges of the riches of our Holy Tradition. The small sampling of aposticha presented below are offered with minimal comment more for the reader's reflection and meditation than for continuous reading. Many more such hymns can be found in *The Tridion* and *The Lenten Triodion Supplement* from which these are taken.

Aposticha in the *first week* of lent focus on the *purpose of our fasting and lenten effort*. They expand on the Gospel readings from the preceding weekend to not practice our righteousness before others so as to be seen by them, but to do acts of mercy, pray and fast in secret so that our communion with our heavenly Father will be cultivated. Without exception, they contain the phrase 'Let us', indicating that they are not so much prayers to God as exhortations and reminders to the gathered community: we travel through the Great Fast not as isolated individuals but in communion with one another, bearing one another's burdens and holding one another accountable.

Let us observe a fast acceptable and pleasing to the Lord. True fasting is to put away all evil, to control the tongue, to forbear from anger, to abstain from lust, slander, falsehood and perjury. If we renounce these things, then is our fasting true and acceptable to God. (Monday Vespers)

With great gladness let us accept the proclamation of the Fast: for if Adam our forefather had fasted, we should not have suffered banishment from Eden. The fruit that brought death upon me was pleasant to the eyes and good for food. Then let us not be taken prisoner by our eyes; let not our tongue delight in costly foods, for once they have been eaten they are worthless. Let us shun all greed: then we shall not become slaves to the passions which follow an excess of food and drink. Let us sign ourselves with the blood of Him who for our sakes willingly was led to death, and the destroying angel will not touch us; and may we eat the Holy Passover of Christ for the salvation of our souls. (Friday Matins)

In the *second week of Lent*, the aposticha extend the first week's theme by emphasizing repentance through our persistent practice of *almsgiving, prayer and fasting*. Once again the hymns are dominated by "Let us", expressing a sense of urgency that we participate in exhorting one another to

faithful and genuine persistence in our lenten effort.

Prayer and fasting are a marvelous weapon. Through them Moses became writer of the Law and Elijah a fiery enemy of false sacrifice. Let us persevere in them, ye faithful, and cry unto the Saviour: Against Thee only have we sinned; have mercy on us. (Monday Matins)

Let us keep a spiritual fast: let us loose every bond; let us avoid the stumbling blocks of sin; let us absolve our brothers from their debts, that we too may be forgiven our transgressions. Then we shall be able to cry aloud to God: Let our prayer be set forth in Thy sight as incense, O Lord. (Monday Vespers)

In this season of repentance, let us stretch out our hands in works of mercy; and then the ascetic struggles of the Fast will bring us to eternal life. For nothing saves the soul so much as generosity to those in need and almsgiving combined with fasting will deliver a man from death. Let us do all this with gladness, for there is no better way, and it will bring salvation to our souls. (Thursday Matins)

*The Parable of the Prodigal Son* is the focus of the *third week's aposticha*. Two provocative threads which run through these hymns are (1) that God filled our lives with his gifts even as the prodigal's father had given him great wealth, and (2) that so much of what we spend our lives on in this world does not satisfy us even as the prodigal could not be satisfied by eating pig's food. These hymns are all prayers directed to the Father, habitually employing the words of the prodigal as our prayers of confession and repentance. Accordingly, the subjects in these hymns is no longer "us" but "I". I need to take responsibility for my squandering of the abundant gifts the Father has bestowed on me. May God grant each of us the honesty with ourselves, before Him and our confessors, to truly make these words our own.

Though honoured as a son by the loving Father, in my foolishness I did not understand. I have deprived myself of glory, sinfully wasting the wealth of grace. I have forsaken the divine food, eating in servile bondage at the table of an unclean citizen. He has sent me into his soul-destroying field, and living like the Prodigal I have fed with the beasts; I was enslaved to the pleasures and could not eat my fill. But now I have turned back, and I shall cry to the compassionate and merciful Father: I have sinned against heaven and before Thee; have mercy upon me. (Wednesday Matins)

Like the Prodigal I have fallen from sonship, and as a slave I have eaten with the swine, yet was not satisfied by their food; but now I return to Thee, O compassionate Father. Wrongly I forsook Thee, but rightly have I turned back in repentance, and I cry: I have sinned against heaven and before Thee, O Father; grant to me, returning homeward, Thy great mercy. (Thursday Matins)

I have scattered the riches which the Father gave me and wasted my life as the Prodigal, carried away by the evil thoughts of sin. Taking pleasure in the sweetness of passion, I have transgressed Thy saving commandments and become like the unthinking beasts. O Christ my God, who for

my sake wast pleased to hang upon the Cross, deprive me not of sonship, but accept me as I now turn back to Thee like the Prodigal Son, and save me. (Friday Matins)

Aposticha in the *fourth week* of Lent take up *the Parable of the Publican and Pharisee*. Emphasising the relentless choice we face between the arrogant vainglory of the pharisee and the self-effacing humility of the publican, these hymns intertwine the example of Christ's humility with prayer to Him as a means of strengthening our resolve to choose the humble path. They also introduce, as is so common in the Psalms, exhortations to our own soul to contemplate with attentiveness the great contrast in these two ways and to follow the path of crying out for God's mercy.

Consider, my soul, how the vainglorious Pharisee was condemned because of pride, and how the humble-minded Publican was justified through confessing his transgressions. Make haste to reject the Pharisee's rash self-assurance, and to follow the Publican by confessing thine offences. Through control of the passions rouse thyself to attain the exaltation which cannot be abased, conferred on thee by Christ in His great mercy. (Tuesday Matins)

I have surpassed the Publican in my transgressions, yet I do not vie with him in his repentance; I have not gained the virtue of the Pharisee, yet I imitate his self-conceit. O Christ my God, in Thy supreme humility Thou hast upon the Cross destroyed the devil's arrogance: make me a stranger to the past sins of the Publican and to the great foolishness of the Pharisee; establish in my soul the good that each of them possessed, and save me. (Tuesday Vespers)

Learn from the Lord who humbled Himself for thy sake, even to death upon the Cross; learn from Him, O my soul, the abasement that comes from being lifted up and the exaltation that comes from humility. Do not be exalted by thy virtues; do not judge thyself righteous and condemn thy neighbour, like the boastful Pharisee. But with thy mind downcase, thinking only of thy sins, cry like the Publican: God, be merciful to me a sinner and save me. (Thursday Vespers)

*The Parable of the Good Samaritan* is explored in the aposticha of the *fifth week*. Christ Himself is the good samaritan who comes to heal us of our self-inflicted wounds brought about by our sins. While there are a few instances of exhorting our souls, the hymns are predominantly prayers directed to Christ from the contrite individual.

Banished from Thy straight path through the passions, in my wretchedness I have fallen headlong down into the pit. The Levite and the Priest, passing by together, turned from me with disdain; but Thou, O Christ, hast taken pity on me. Tearing up the record of my sins with the weapon of the Cross, Thou hast freed me from the passions and glorified me, enthroning me beside the Father. And so I cry aloud: O Lord beyond my understanding, glory to Thee. (Tuesday Vespers)

Forsaking the height of the virtues, O my soul, thou hast descended to the depths of sin, and fallen among evil thieves upon the road; and now thou dost lie covered with rotting sores, prostrate and helpless. But cry aloud to Christ thy God, who was crucified and wounded of His own will for

thy sake: ‘Take care of me, O Lord, and save me.’ (Wednesday Matins)

Thou wast crucified with the thieves, O Christ our God, and Thou hast healed man’s nature by Thy wounds. I have fallen among invisible robbers, among bodiless thieves; they have stripped me of virtue and grievously wounded me. O despise me not: none of the saints can heal me; I lie half dead and have but little life remaining in me. Thou art my only help, who hast restored the dead to life: bind up my wounds, pouring upon me the oil of Thy compassion; for Thou alone lovest mankind. (Friday Matins)

In the *sixth and final week* of the holy fast the aposticha invite us to enter our Lord’s *Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus*. Intertwining prayers to Christ, exhortations to our own soul, and exhortations to the gathered community, these hymns provide a multi-faceted interpretation of this sobering parable:

Deliver us, O Savior, from soul-destroying greed, and give us a place with Lazarus the poor man in the bosom of Abraham. For Thou who art rich in mercy hast for our sakes willingly become poor, and Thou hast led us from corruption into incorruption, because Thou art a God of tender compassion and love for mankind. (Monday Vespers)

Thou wast clothed, O my soul, in the divinely-woven purple of self-mastery and in the fine linen of incorruption, but thou hast insulted thine own dignity. Thou hast made sin thy wealth and thy delight, and looked with scorn upon thy fellow men, like the rich man who despised Lazarus in his poverty. Lest thou share the rich man’s punishment, become poor in spirit and cry to the Lord who for thy sake became poor: Before Thy Crucifixion Thou hast worn the purple of mockery, and for my sake wast nailed naked to the Cross; deliver me from eternal shame, O Christ, and clothe me in the raiment of Thy Kingdom. (Tuesday Vespers)

May God grant that these simple reflections on the aposticha from the weekdays of Great Lent be an invitation to us all to humbly support one another in our lenten journey and to heighten our attentive participation in the beautiful hymns of Christ’s holy Church.