

**SERMON on the possessed young man - Matt. 17:14-23, Sunday, August 5, 2018. Prayer and Fasting.**

The Elder Ephraim of Arizona reminds us that when we sin, we give the Devil rights. In other words, when we voluntarily succumb to temptation and sin, we relinquish power to the Devil over us. It is a frightful thing to think that the Devil has power over us. It is comforting to know that, with God's help, it is our choice whether or not we choose to let the Devil have power over us. We all sin, there is no one who does not sin. That is why it is so important for us to go to Confession. In Confession we repent for our sins, the Lord forgives us, and the Devil loses his rights over us. The circumstances of the life of this young man and his father are not revealed to us in the Gospel today. We only know that according to the Holy Fathers sin has played a role in allowing the Devil to possess this young man. Please understand, that in the Gospel we hear that the young man had epilepsy. The man did not have epilepsy in the medical sense that we understand epilepsy today. There is a distinction between having an illness and being possessed. Although the word epilepsy is used, it is clearly a case of demonic possession that is causing the man to suffer, and not the physical illness epilepsy. His possession may have resembled epilepsy because of how he behaved, but he did not have epilepsy. The power of prayer and fasting are revealed to us today. The disciples could not cast out the demon from the young man because, Jesus says, "This kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting." Dear Christian, pay heed to what our Savior says! Be scrupulous in keeping the fasts of the church and in saying your prayers, at home and at church. Every time we break the fast or neglect our prayers we walk a fine line and put ourselves in peril. We loosen the protective shield of grace that protects us from the demons and their malicious intent against us to do us harm, physically and spiritually. We are in the midst of a spiritual battle, a war with invisible foes. Just like a soldier who goes into battle never lays down his weapons or his shield, as a Christian soldier we should never surrender the weapons of prayer and fasting. We are always engaged in the spiritual warfare, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, every year and day and minute of our life until we take our last breath. Dear Christian, don't ever think for even a moment that there is a break in the battle and the demons are taking a rest. They never rest, and they especially seek the moment when we relax and let our guard down to pounce on us with all of their fury and all of their might. It is possible for us to be deluded, to be completely enveloped in sin and in the grasp of the Devil and not even be aware of it. Things might seem calm and well, and we are deluded to think that we can neglect prayer and fasting. Be assured, dear Christian, that if we thus delude ourselves, the time will come when when this false calm and this false sense of peace will become the worst form of hell and suffering for us if we do not always stand guard and say our prayers and keep the fasts of the Church. A mother once came to St. Seraphim of Sarov, whose daughter wanted to get married. The mother was very concerned about the happiness of her daughter, and wanted to know if the girl should marry this man. St. Seraphim answered her by saying, "Before anything else, find out if her fiancée keeps the fasts of the church. And here the Elder tells her straight out - "Whoever does not fast is not even a Christian." If you are ill, if your physician advises you to eat certain foods and not to fast, then by all means listen to your physician. It is not a sin in that case not to fast. You will be rewarded a hundredfold by your humility if you listen to your physician and eat whenever and whatever he tells you to eat. Our Lord does not teach foolish things and he certainly does not teach us to hurt ourselves or to make ourselves ill. And in those circumstances you let your priest know and you can still receive Holy Communion. When I visit people in the hospital, I never ask them what they eat and when they ate. I always encourage them to eat whatever is put before them and I always give them Holy Communion, even if they ate dinner five minutes before I came into the room. But for those who have no excuse not to fast — remember, if you want to be a true son or daughter of the Orthodox Church - you must keep the fasts. St. seraphim of Sarov once said that no one has ever died from fasting, but many have died from overeating. A simple and wise saying. It is my hope and prayer that all of us, from this day forward, will keep the fasts as

much as it is within our power to do so, and the one who does not fast will not experience the great joy of the feast of the Dormition and all the feasts of the church like the one who keeps the fast. Amen.