

1 Corinthians 12:21

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of unity and mutual care within the body of Christ, highlighting that every member is essential and worthy of honor.

Scripture: Matthew 12:25, 1 Corinthians 12:22-26

Topics: "Church Unity", "Christian Love"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of unity and mutual care among believers, using the analogy of the human body to illustrate how each member, regardless of status, is necessary and deserving of honor. He emphasizes that envy and jealousy within the body of believers can lead to division and destruction, urging listeners to imitate the love and care exhibited by the different parts of the body. Chrysostom warns against the dangers of envy, highlighting how it not only harms others but also brings ruin to the one who harbors such feelings, ultimately separating individuals from the unity and blessings of the Church.

Transcript

And the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you: or again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.

Having checked the envy of those in lower rank, and having taken off the dejection which it was likely that they would feel from greater gifts having been vouchsafed to others, he humbles also the pride of these latter who had received the greater gifts. He had done the same indeed in his discourse also with the former. For the statement that it was a gift and not an achievement was intended to declare this. But now he does it again even more vehemently, dwelling on the same image. For from the body in what follows, and from the unity thence arising, he proceeds to the actual comparison of the members, a thing on which they were especially seeking to be instructed. Since there was not so much power to console them in the circumstance of their being all one body, as in the conviction that in the very things wherewith they were endowed, they were not left greatly behind. And he says, The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you: or again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.

For though the gift be less, yet is it necessary: and as when the one is absent, many functions are impeded, so also without the other there is a maim in the fullness of the Church. And he said not, will not say, but cannot say. So that even though it wish it, though it should actually say so, it is out of the question nor is the thing consistent with nature. For this cause having taken the two extremes, he makes trial of his

argument in them, first in respect of the hand and the eye, and secondly, in respect of the head and feet, adding force to the example.

For what is meaner than the foot? Or what more honorable and more necessary than the head? For this, the head, more than any thing, is the man. Nevertheless, it is not of itself sufficient nor could it alone perform all things; since if this were so, our feet would be a superfluous addition.

2. And neither did he stop here, but seeks also another amplification, a kind of thing which he is always doing, contending not only to be on equal terms but even advancing beyond. Wherefore also he adds, saying,

1 Corinthians 12:22

Nay, much rather those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble are necessary:

1 Corinthians 12:23

And those parts of the body which we think to be less honorable, upon these we bestow more abundant honor; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness.

In every clause adding the term body, and thereby both consoling the one and checking the other. For I affirm not this only, says he, that the greater have need of the less, but that they have also much need. Since if there be any thing weak in us, if any thing dishonorable, this is both necessary and enjoys greater honor. And he well said, which seem, and, which we think; pointing out that the judgment arises not from the nature of the things, but from the opinion of the many. For nothing in us is dishonorable, seeing it is God's work. Thus what in us is esteemed less honorable than our genital members? Nevertheless, they enjoy greater honor. And the very poor, even if they have the rest of the body naked, cannot endure to exhibit those members naked. Yet surely this is not the condition of things dishonorable; but it was natural for them to be despised rather than the rest. For so in a house the servant who is dishonored, so far from enjoying greater attention, has not even an equal share vouchsafed him. By the same rule likewise, if this member were dishonorable, instead of having greater privileges it ought not even to enjoy the same: whereas now it has more honor for its portion: and this too the wisdom of God has effected. For to some parts by their nature He has given not to need it: but to others, not having granted it by their nature, He has compelled us to yield it. Yet are they not therefore dishonorable. Since the animals too by their nature have a sufficiency, and need neither clothing nor shoes nor a roof, the greater part of them: yet not on this account is our body less honorable than they, because it needs all these things.

Yea rather, were one to consider accurately, these parts in question are even by nature itself both honorable and necessary. Which in truth Paul himself imitated, giving his judgment in their favor not from our care and from their enjoying greater honor, but from the very nature of the things.

Wherefore when he calls them weak and less honorable, he uses the expression, which seem: but when he calls them necessary, he no longer adds which seem, but himself gives his judgment, saying, they are necessary; and very properly. For they are useful to procreation of children and the succession of our race. Wherefore also the Roman legislators punish them that mutilate these members and make men eunuchs, as persons who do injury to our common stock and affront nature herself.

But woe to the dissolute who bring reproach on the handy-works of God. For as many are wont to curse wine on account of the drunken, and womankind on account of the unchaste; so also they account these

members base because of those who use them not as they ought. But improperly. For the sin is not allotted to the thing as a portion of its nature, but the transgression is produced by the will of him that ventures on it.

But some suppose that the expressions, the feeble members, and less honorable, and necessary, and which enjoy more abundant honor, are used by Paul of eyes and feet, and that he speaks of the eye as more feeble, and necessary, because though deficient in strength, they have the advantage in utility: but of the feet as the less honorable: for these also receive from us great consideration.

3. Next, not to work out yet another amplification, he says,

1 Corinthians 12:24

But our comely parts have no need:

That is, lest any should say, Why what kind of speech is this, to despise the honorable and pay court to the less honored? we do not this in contempt, says he, but because they 'have no need.' And see how large a measure of praise he thus sets down in brief, and so hastens on: a thing most conveniently and usefully done. And neither is he content with this, but adds also the cause, saying, But God tempered the body together, giving more abundant honor unto that part which lacked:

1 Corinthians 12:25

That there should be no schism in the body.

Now if He tempered it together, He did not suffer that which is more uncomely to appear. For that which is mingled becomes one thing, and it does not appear what it was before: since otherwise we could not say that it was tempered. And see how he continually hastens by the defects, saying, that which lacked. He said not, to that which is dishonorable, to that which is unseemly, but, to that which lacked, (that which lacked; how? By nature,) giving more abundant honor. And wherefore? That there should be no schism in the body. Thus because, though they enjoyed an endless store of consolation, they nevertheless indulged grief as if they had received less than others, he signifies that they were rather honored. For his phrase is, Giving more abundant honor to that which lacked.

Next he also adds the reason, showing that with a view to their profit he both caused it to lack and more abundantly honored it. And what is the reason? That there should be no schism, says he, in the body. (And he said not, in the members, but, in the body.) For there would indeed be a great and unfair advantage, if some members were cared for both by nature and by our forethought, others not even by either one of these. Then would they be cut off from one another, from inability to endure the connection. And when these were cut off, there would be harm done also to the rest. Do you see how he points out, that of necessity greater honor is given to that which lacks? For had not this been so, the injury would have become common to all, says he. And the reason is, that unless these received great consideration on our part, they would have been rudely treated, as not having the help of nature: and this rude treatment would have been their ruin: their ruin would have divided the body; and the body having been divided, the other members also would have perished, which are far greater than these.

Do you see that the care of these latter is connected with making provision for those? For they have not their being so much in their own nature, as in their being one, by virtue of the body. Wherefore if the body perish, they profit nothing by such health as they have severally. But if the eye remain or the nose,

preserving its proper function, yet when the bond of union is broken there will be no use for them ever after; whereas, suppose this remaining, and those injured, they both support themselves through it and speedily return to health.

But perhaps some one may say, this indeed in the body has reason, that 'that which lacks has received more abundant honor,' but among men how may this be made out? Why, among men most especially you may see this taking place. For so they who came at the eleventh hour first received their hire; and the sheep that had wandered induced the shepherd to leave behind the ninety and nine and run after it, and when it was found, he bore and did not drive it; and the prodigal son obtained more honor than he who was approved; and the thief was crowned and proclaimed before the Apostles. And in the case of the talents also you may see this happen: in that to him that received the five talents, and to him that received two, were vouchsafed the same rewards; yea, by the very circumstance that he received the two, he was the more favored with great providential care. Since had he been entrusted with the five, with his want of ability he would have fallen from the whole: but having received the two and fulfilled his own duty, he was thought worthy of the same with him that had gained the five, having so far the advantage, as with less labor to obtain the same crown. And yet he too was a man as well as the one that traded with the five. Nevertheless, his Master does not in any wise call him to a strict account, nor compel him to do the same with his fellow-servant, nor does he say, Why can you not gain the five? (though he might justly have said so,) but assigned him likewise his crown.

4. Knowing these things therefore, you that are greater, trample not on the less, lest, instead of them, you injure yourselves. For when they are cut off, the whole body is destroyed. Since, what else is a body than the existence of many members? As also Paul himself says, that the body is not one member, but many. If therefore this be the essence of a body, let us take care that the many continue many. Since, unless this be entirely preserved, the stroke is in the vital parts; which is the reason also why the Apostle does not require this only, their not being separated, but also their being closely united. For instance, having said, that there be no schism in the body, he was not content with this, but added, that the members should have the same care one for another. Adding this other cause also of the less enjoying more honor. For not only lest they should be separated one from another has God so contrived it, but also that there may be abundant love and concord. For if each man's being depends on his neighbor's safety, tell me not of the less and the more: in this case there is no more and less. While the body continues you may see the difference too, but when it perishes, no longer. And perish it will, unless the lesser parts also continue.

If now even the greater members will perish when the less are broken off, these ought to care in like manner for the less, and so as for themselves, inasmuch as in the safety of these the greater likewise remain. So then, should you say ten thousand times, such member is dishonored and inferior, still if you provide not for it in like manner as for yourself, if you neglect it as inferior, the injury will pass on to yourself. Wherefore he said not only, that the members should care one for another, but he added, that they should have the same care one for another, i.e., in like manner the small should enjoy the same providential care with great.

Say not then, that such is an ordinary person, but consider he is a member of that body which holds together the whole: and as the eye, so also does he cause the body to be a body. For where the body is built up, there none has anything more than his neighbor: since neither does this make a body, there being one part greater and another less, but their being many and diverse. For even as thou, because you are greater, helped to make up the body, so also he, because he is less. So that his comparative deficiency, when the body is to be built up, turns out of equal value with you unto this noble contribution : yea, he

avails as much as yourself. And it is evident from hence. Let there be no member greater or less, nor more and less honorable: but let all be eye or all head: will not the body perish? Every one sees it. Again, if all be inferior, the same thing will happen. So that in this respect also the less are proved equal. Yea, and if one must say something more, the purpose of the less being less is that the body may remain. So that for your sake he is less, in order that you may continue to be great. And here is the cause of his demanding the same care from all. And having said, that the members may have the same care one for another, he explains the same thing again, by saying,

1 Corinthians 12:26

5. And whether one member suffers all the members suffer with it; or one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

Yea, with no other view, says he, did He make the care He requires common, establishing unity in so great diversity, but that of all events there might be complete communion. Because, if our care for our neighbor be the common safety, it follows also that our glory and our sadness must be common. Three things therefore he here demands: the not being divided but united in perfection: the having like care for another: and the considering all that happens common. And as above he says, He has given more abundant honor to that part which lacked, because it needs it; signifying that the very inferiority was become an introduction to greater honor; so here he equalizes them in respect of the care also which takes place mutually among them.

For therefore did he cause them to partake of greater honor, says he, that they might not meet with less care. And not from hence only, but also by all that befalls them, good and painful, are the members bound to one another. Thus often when a thorn is fixed in the heel, the whole body feels it and cares for it: both the back is bent and the belly and thighs are contracted, and the hands coming forth as guards and servants draw out what was so fixed, and the head stoops over it, and the eyes observe it with much care.

So that even if the foot has inferiority from its inability to ascend, yet by its bringing down the head it has an equality, and is favored with the same honor; and especially whenever the feet are the cause of the head's coming down, not by favor but by their claim on it. And thus, if by being the more honorable it has an advantage; yet in that, being so it owes such honor and care to the lesser and likewise equal sympathy: by this it indicates great equality. Since what is meaner than the heel?

What more honorable than the head? Yet this member reaches to that, and moves them all together with itself. Again if anything is the matter with the eyes, all complain and all are idle: and neither do the feet walk nor the hands work, nor does the stomach enjoy its accustomed food; and yet the affection is of the eyes. Why do you cause the stomach to pine? Why keep your feet still? Why bind your hands? Because they are tied to the feet, and in an unspeakable manner the whole body suffers.

For if it shared not in the suffering, it would not endure to partake of the care. Wherefore having said, that the members may have the same care one for another, he added, whether one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. And how do they rejoice with it? say you. The head is crowned, and the whole man is honored. The mouth speaks, and the eyes laugh and are delighted. Yet the credit belongs not to the beauty of the eyes, but to the tongue.

Again if the eyes appear beautiful, the whole woman is embellished: as indeed these also, when a straight nose and upright neck and other members are praised, rejoice and appear cheerful: and again they shed

tears in great abundance over their griefs and misfortunes, though themselves continue uninjured.

6. Let us all then, considering these things, imitate the love of these members; let us not in any wise do the contrary, trampling on the miseries of our neighbor and envying his good things. For this is the part of madmen and persons beside themselves. Just as he that digs out his own eye has displayed a very great proof of senselessness; and he that devours his own hand exhibits a clear evidence of downright madness.

Now if this be the case with regard to the members, so likewise, when it happens among the brethren, it fastens on us the reputation of folly and brings on no common mischief. For as long as he shines, your comeliness also is apparent and the whole body is beautified. For not at all does he confine the beauty to himself alone, but permits you also to glory. But if you extinguish him, you bring a common darkness upon the whole body, and the misfortune you cause is common to all the members: as indeed if you preserve him in brightness, you preserve the bloom of the entire body. For no man says, the eye is beautiful: but what? such a woman is beautiful. And if it also be praised, it comes after the common encomium. So likewise it happens in the Church. I mean, if there be any celebrated persons, the community reaps the good report of it. For the enemies are not apt to divide the praises, but connect them together. And if any be brilliant in speech, they do not praise him alone but likewise the whole Church. For they do not say only, such a one is a wonderful man, but what? the Christians have a wonderful teacher: and so they make the possession common.

7. And now let me ask, do heathens bind together, and do you divide and war with your own body, and withstand your own members? Do you not know that this overturns all? For even a kingdom, says he, divided against itself shall not stand. Matthew 12:25

But nothing so divides and separates as envy and jealousy, that grievous disease, and exempt from all pardon, and in some respect worse than the root of all evils. 1 Timothy 6:12 For the covetous is then pleased when himself has received: but the envious is then pleased, when another has failed to receive, not when himself has received. For he thinks the misfortunes of others a benefit to himself, rather than prosperity; going about a common enemy of mankind, and smiting the members of Christ, than which what can be more akin to madness? A demon is envious, but of men, not of any demon: but thou being a man enviest men, and withstandest what is of your own tribe and family, which not even a demon does. And what pardon shall you obtain, what excuse? Trembling and turning pale at sight of a brother in prosperity, when you ought to crown yourself and to rejoice and exult.

If indeed you wish to emulate him, I forbid not that: emulate, but with a view to be like him who is approved: not in order to depress him but that you may reach the same lofty point, that you may display the same excellence. This is wholesome rivalry, imitation without contention: not to grieve at the good things of others but to be vexed at our own evils: the contrary to which is the result of envy. For neglecting its own evils, it pines away at the good fortune of other men. And thus the poor is not so vexed by his own poverty as by the plenty of his neighbor; than which what can be more grievous? Yea, in this respect the envious, as I before said, is worse than the covetous; the one rejoicing at some acquisition of his own, while the other finds his delight in some one else failing to receive.

Wherefore I beseech you, leaving this evil way, to change to a proper emulation, (for it is a violent thing, this kind of zeal, and hotter than any fire,) and to win thereby mighty blessings. Thus also Paul used to guide those of Jewish origin unto the faith, saying, If by any means I may provoke to emulation them which

are my flesh, and may save some of them. Romans 11:14 For he whose emulation is like what Paul wished for does not pine when he sees the other in reputation, but when he sees himself left behind: the envious not so, but at the sight of another's prosperity. And he is a kind of drone, injuring other men's labors; and himself never anxious to rise, but weeping when he sees another rising, and doing every thing to throw him down. To what then might one compare this passion? It seems to me to be like as if a sluggish ass and heavy with abundance of flesh, being yoked with a winged courser, should neither himself be willing to rise, and should attempt to drag the other down by the weight of his carcass. For so this man takes no thought nor anxiety to be himself rid of this deep slumber, but does every thing to supplant and throw down him that is flying towards heaven, becoming an exact emulator of the devil: since he too, seeing man in paradise, sought not to change his own condition, but to cast him out of paradise. And again, seeing him seated in heaven and the rest hastening there, he holds to the same plan, supplanting them who are hastening there and hereby heaping up the furnace more abundantly for himself. For in every instance this happens: both he that is envied, if he be vigilant, becoming more eminent; and he that is envious, accumulating to himself more evils. Thus also Joseph became eminent, thus Aaron the priest: the conspiracy of the envious caused God once and again to give His suffrage for him, and was the occasion of the rod's budding. Thus Jacob attained his abundant wealth and all those other blessings. Thus the envious pierce themselves through with ten thousand evils. Knowing as we do all these things, let us flee such emulation. For wherefore, tell me, do you envy? Because your brother has received spiritual grace? And from whom did he receive it? Answer me. Was it not from God? Clearly then He is the object of the enmity to Which you are committing yourself, He the bestower of the gift. Do you see which way the evil is tending, and with what sort of a point it is crowning the heap of your sins; and how deep the pit of vengeance which it is digging for you?

Let us flee it, then, beloved, and neither envy others, nor fail to pray for our enviers and do all we can to extinguish their passion: neither let us feel as the unthinking do who being minded to exact punishment of them, do all in their power to light up their flame. But let not us do so; rather let us weep for them and lament. For they are the injured persons, having continual worm gnawing through their heart, and collecting a fountain of poison more bitter than any gall. Come now, let us beseech the merciful God, both to change their state of feeling and that we may never fall into that disease: since heaven is indeed inaccessible to him that has this wasting sore, and before heaven too, even this present life is not worth living in. For not so thoroughly are timber and wool wont to be eaten through by moth and worm abiding therein, as does the fever of envy devour the very bones of the envious and destroy all self-command in their soul.

In order then that we may deliver both ourselves and others from these innumerable woes, let us expel from within us this evil fever, this that is more grievous than any gangrene: that having regained spiritual strength, we may both finish the present course and obtain the future crowns; unto which may we all attain, by the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom to the Father, with the Holy Ghost, be glory, power, honor, now and ever, and world without end. Amen.

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