

1 Corinthians 14:34

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's sermon on 1 Corinthians 14:34 emphasizes the importance of women's silence in churches to maintain order and respect in worship.

Scripture: Genesis 3:16, 1 Corinthians 4:17, 1 Corinthians 11:33, 1 Corinthians 14:33, 1 Corinthians 14:35, 1 Corinthians 14:37-38, 1 Corinthians 14:40, Colossians 1:6, 1 Thessalonians 1:8

Topics: "Church Order", "Women In Ministry"

Description

John Chrysostom addresses the issue of women speaking in churches, emphasizing the need for silence and subjection based on the law. He highlights the vulnerability of women to idle speech and the importance of learning at home from their husbands. Chrysostom points out the shamefulness of women speaking in public and the need for order and submission in the church. He concludes by urging the congregation to desire prophecy and maintain decency and order in all things.

Transcript

Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but let them be in subjection, as also says the law.

Having abated the disturbance both from the tongues and from the prophesyings; and having made a law to prevent confusion, that they who speak with tongues should do this in turn, and that they who prophesy should be silent when another begins; he next in course proceeds to the disorder which arose from the women, cutting off their unseasonable boldness of speech: and that very opportunely. For if to them that have the gifts it is not permitted to speak inconsiderately, nor when they will, and this, though they be moved by the Spirit; much less to those women who prate idly and to no purpose. Therefore he represses their babbling with much authority, and taking the law along with him, thus he sews up their mouths; not simply exhorting here or giving counsel, but even laying his commands on them vehemently, by the recitation of an ancient law on that subject. For having said, Let your women keep silence in the churches; and it is not permitted unto them to speak, but let them be in subjection; he added, as also says the law. And where does the law say this? Your desire shall be to your husband, and he shall rule over you. Genesis 3:16 Do you see the wisdom of Paul, what kind of testimony he adduced, one that not only enjoins on them silence, but silence too with fear; and with as great fear as that wherewith a maid servant ought to keep herself quiet. Wherefore also having himself said, it is not permitted unto them to speak, he added not, but to be silent, but instead of to be silent, he set down what is more, to wit, the being in

subjection. And if this be so in respect of husbands, much more in respect of teachers, and fathers, and the general assembly of the Church. But if they are not even to speak, says one, nor ask a question, to what end are they to be present? That they may hear what they ought; but the points which are questioned let them learn at home from their husbands. Wherefore also he added,

1 Corinthians 14:35

And if they would learn any thing, let them ask their own husbands at home.

Thus, not only, as it seems, are they not allowed to speak, says he, at random, but not even to ask any question in the church. Now if they ought not to ask questions, much more is their speaking at pleasure contrary to law. And what may be the cause of his setting them under so great subjection? Because the woman is in some sort a weaker being and easily carried away and light minded. Here you see why he set over them their husbands as teachers, for the benefit of both. For so he both rendered the women orderly, and the husbands he made anxious, as having to deliver to their wives very exactly what they heard.

Further, because they supposed this to be an ornament to them, I mean their speaking in public; again he brings round the discourse to the opposite point, saying, For it is shameful for a woman to speak in the church. That is, first he made this out from the law of God, then from common reason and our received custom; even when he was discoursing with the women about long hair, he said, Does not even nature herself teach you? 1 Corinthians 11:14 And everywhere you may find this to be his manner, not only from the divine Scriptures, but also from the common custom, to put them to shame.

2. But besides these things, he also shames them by consideration of what all agreed on, and what was every where prescribed; which topic also here he has set down, saying,

1 Corinthians 14:36

What? Was it from you that the word of God went forth? Or came it unto you alone?

Thus he brings in the other Churches also as holding this law, both abating the disturbance by consideration of the novelty of the thing, and by the general voice making his saying acceptable. Wherefore also elsewhere he said, Who shall put you in remembrance of my ways which be in Christ, even as I teach everywhere in all the Churches. 1 Corinthians 4:17 And again, God is not a God of confusion, but of peace, as in all the Churches of the saints. 1 Corinthians 14:33 And here, What? Was it from you that the word of God went forth? Or came it unto you alone? i.e., neither first, nor alone are you believers, but the whole world. Which also writing to the Colossians he said, even as it is bearing fruit and increasing in all the world, Colossians 1:6 speaking of the Gospel.

But he turns it also at another time to the encouragement of his hearers; as when he says that theirs were the first fruits, and were manifest unto all. Thus, writing to the Thessalonians he said, For from you has sounded forth the word of God, and, in every place your faith to God-ward is gone forth. 1 Thessalonians 1:8 And again to the Romans, Your faith is proclaimed throughout the whole world. For both are apt to shame and stir up, as well the being commended of others, as that they have others partakers in their judgment. Wherefore also here he says; What? Was it from you that the word of God went forth? Or came it unto you only? For neither can you say this, says he; we were made teachers to the rest, and it cannot be right for us to learn of others; nor, the faith remained in this place only, and no precedents from other quarters ought to be received. Do you see by how many arguments he put them to shame? He introduced

the law, he signified the shamefulness of the thing, he brought forward the other Churches.

3. Next, what is strongest of all he puts last, saying, God ordains these things even at this time by me.

1 Corinthians 14:37

Thus: if any man thinks himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him take knowledge of the things which I write unto you that they are the commandments of the Lord.

1 Corinthians 14:38

But if any man is ignorant, let him be ignorant.

And wherefore did he add this? Intimating that he is not using violence nor contention, which is a sign of them who wish not to set up their own things, but aim at what is profitable to others. Wherefore also in another place he says, But if any man seems to be contentious, we have no such custom. 1 Corinthians 11:16 But he does not this everywhere, but only where the offenses are not very great, and then rather as putting them to shame. Since when he discourses of other sins, he speaks not thus. But how? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor effeminate, shall inherit the kingdom of God. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 And again, Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if you receive circumcision, Christ will profit you nothing. Galatians 5:2 But here, since his discourse was of silence, he does not very keenly inveigh against them, by this very thing attracting them the more. Then, as he is ever wont to do, unto the former subject whence he digressed to say these things, he brings back his discourse as follows:

1 Corinthians 14:39

Wherefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues.

For this too is his wont, not only to work out what is before him, but also starting from that to set right whatever seems to him in any way akin to it, and again to return to the former, so as not to appear to wander from the subject. For so when he was discoursing of their concord in their banquets, he digressed to their Communion in the Mysteries, and having thence put them to shame, he returns again to the former, saying, Wherefore, when you come together to eat, wait one for another. 1 Corinthians 11:33

And here, accordingly, having discoursed of good order in their gifts, and of its being a duty neither to faint in the lesser, nor to be puffed up on account of the greater; then having made an excursion from thence to the sobriety becoming women and having established it, he returns again to his subject, saying, Wherefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues. Do you see how to the end he preserved the difference of these? And how he signifies that the one is very necessary, the other not so? Wherefore of the one he says, desire earnestly, but of the other, forbid not.

4. Then, as in brief summary, setting all things right, he adds the words,

1 Corinthians 14:40

Let all things be done decently and in order.

Again giving a blow to them who chose to behave themselves unseemly without cause, and to incur the imputation of madness; and who keep not their proper rank. For nothing does so build up as good order, as peace, as love; even as their contraries tend to pull down. And not only in things spiritual, but also in all

others one may observe this. Thus whether it be in a dance, or a ship, or in a chariot, or a camp, if you should confound the order, and casting the greater out of their proper place, should bring in the lesser into their rank, you destroy all, and thus things are turned upside down. Neither let us then destroy our order, nor place the head below and the feet above: now this is done when we cast down right reason, and set our lusts, passions, and pleasure, over the rational part: whence violent are the billows, and great the confusion, and intolerable the tempest, all things being wrapt in darkness.

And, if you will, let us first examine the unseemliness which arises herefrom, and then the loss. How then may this be clear to us, and thoroughly known? Let us bring forward a man in that frame of mind; enamoured of a harlot and overcome by a dishonorable passion; and then we shall see the mockery which this comes to. For what can be baser than a man watching the doors before the harlots' chambers, and beaten by a whorish woman, and weeping, and lamenting, and turning his glory into shame? And if you will also see the loss, call to mind, I pray, the expenditure of money, the extreme risks, the contests with rival lovers, the wounds, the stripes received in such affrays.

Such also are they who are holden by the lust of wealth; or rather they behave themselves more unseemly. For whereas these are wholly occupied about one person; the covetous busy themselves about all men's substance alike, both poor and rich, and long for things that are not; a thing which above all denotes the wildness of their passion. For they say not, I would fain have the substance of such a person or of such another, only, but they want the very mountains to be gold, and the houses and all that they see; and they go forth into another world, and this passion they feel to a boundless degree, and at no point cease from their lusting. What discourse can set before us the tempest of those thoughts, the waves, the darkness? And where the waves and tempest are so great, what pleasure can there be? There is not any; but tumult, and anguish, and black clouds which instead of rain bring great sorrow of heart: the kind of thing which is wont to happen in the case of those who are enamoured of beauty not their own. Wherefore they who have no passionate love at all are in more pleasure than any lovers.

5. This however no man would gainsay. But to me even he who loves, but restrains his passion, seems to live more pleasurably than he who continually enjoys his mistress. For though the proof be rather difficult, nevertheless even at that disadvantage the argument must be ventured on: the cause of the increased difficulty not being the nature of the thing, but because of the want of meet hearers for this high morality. Thus: whether is it pleasanter, tell me, to the lover, to be despised by his beloved, or to be honored, and to look down upon her? Evidently the latter. Whom then, tell me, will the harlot value more? Him that is a slave to her and is already led captive at her will, or him that is above her nets and soars higher than her arrows? Every one must see, the latter. And about whom will she take more thought, the fallen, or him that is not yet so? Him that is not yet so, of course. And which will be more an object of desire, he who is subdued, or he who is not yet taken? He who up to this time is not yet taken. And if you disbelieve it, I will produce my proof from what takes place within yourselves. As thus: of which woman would a man be more enamored; one that easily submits and gives herself up to him, or one that denies, and gives him trouble? Evidently of this last; since hereby the longing is more vehemently kindled. Of course then in the woman's case also exactly the same thing will happen. And him will they honor and admire more who looks down upon them. But if this be true, so likewise is the other, that he enjoys greater pleasure who is more honored and beloved. Since the general too lets alone the city that has been once taken, but that which stands out and maintains the struggle he besets with all diligence: and the hunter, when the animal is caught, keeps it shut up in darkness as the harlot does her lover, but pursues that which flies from him.

But I shall be told, the one enjoys his desire, the other not so. But freedom from disgrace, and from being a slave under her tyrannical commands, the not being led and dragged about by her as a drudge, beaten, spit upon, pitched head foremost; do you consider this to be a small pleasure, tell me? Nay, if one would accurately examine these things, and were able to gather into one their insults, complaints, everlasting quarrels, some arising from their tempers, others from their wantonness, their enmities, and all the rest, such as they only that feel them know -- he will find that there is no war but has more truces than this wretched life of theirs. What pleasure then do you mean, tell me? The temporary and brief enjoyment of intercourse? But this speedily does strife overtake, and storms, and rage, and the same madness again.

6. And these things have been said by us, as one would speak discoursing with licentious youths, who do not very patiently submit to hear our discourses of the kingdom and of hell.

And now that we are bringing forward these topics also, it is not even possible to say how great is the pleasure of the continent; if one frame in one's own mind his crowns, his rewards, his converse with the angels, the proclaiming of him before the world, his boldness, those blessed and immortal hopes of his.

But intercourse has a certain pleasure: for this they are continually repeating: while the continent continually suffers pain contending with the tyranny of nature. Nay, but one shall find just the contrary result. For this violence and tumult is present with the unchaste rather: there being in his body a violent tempest, and no sea in a storm so grievously vexed as he; never withstanding his passion, but ever receiving blows from it; as the possessed and they that are continually rent in the midst by evil spirits. Whereas the temperate like a noble champion continually giving blows to it, reaps the best of pleasures, and sweeter than ten thousand of that kind; and this victory and his good conscience, and those illustrious trophies, are ornaments for him continually to deck himself withal.

As to the other, if after his intercourse he has a little respite, it must be counted nothing. For again the storm comes on, and again there are waves. But he that commands himself does not suffer this tumult to lay hold of him at all, nor the sea to arise, nor the wild beast to roar. And even if he endure some violence in restraining such an impulse, yet so does the other also, continually receiving blows and stabs, and unable to endure the sting: and it is like as if there were a wild horse furious and struggling, and one should check with the bridle, and hold him in with all skill: while another giving him the rein to escape the trouble, were dragged along by him and carried hither and there.

If I have spoken these things more plainly than is becoming, let no man blame me. For I desire not to make a brave show by a gravity of words, but to make my hearers grave.

Therefore also the prophets spare no such words, wishing to extirpate the licentiousness of the Jews, but do even more nakedly inveigh against them than we do now in the things we have spoken. For so a physician wishing to remove an ulcer does not consider how he may keep his hands clean, but how he may rid the patient of the ulcer; and he who would raise on high the lowly, first makes himself lowly; and he who seeks to slay the conspirator stains himself with blood as well as the other, and this makes him the more brilliant. Since if one were to see a soldier returning from the war, stained with gore and blood and brains, he will not loathe him nor turn from him on this account, but will even admire him the more. So then let us do, when we see any one returning, covered with blood after the slaughter of his evil desire, let us the more admire him and become partakers of his battle and victory, and say to those who indulge this wild love, show us the pleasure you derive from lust; for the continent has that which comes of his victory, but thou none from any quarter. But if you should mention that which is connected with the criminal act,

yet the other is more manifest and satisfactory. For you have from the enjoyment something brief and hardly apparent; but he from his conscience, has both a greater and an enduring and a sweeter joy. The company of a woman has surely no such power as self-command, to preserve the soul undisturbed and give it wings.

Well then: the continent man, as I said, thus evidently makes his pleasure out to us: but in your case I see the dejection arising from defeat, but the pleasure, desiring to see, I find not. For what do you consider the moment of pleasure? That before the criminal action? Nay, it is not so, for it is a time of madness and delirium and frenzy: to grind the teeth and be beside one's self is not any pleasure: and if it were pleasure, it would not produce the same effects on you which they who are in pain endure. For they who strike with their fists and are stricken grind their teeth, and women in travail distracted with pains do the same. So that this is no pleasure, but frenzy rather, and confusion, and tumult. Shall we say then, the time after the action? Nay, neither is this. For neither could we say that a woman just delivered is in pleasure, but in release from certain pains. But this is by no means pleasure, but weakness rather and falling away: and there is a great difference between these two. What then is the time of pleasure, tell me? There is none. But if there be any, it is so brief as not even to be apparent. At least, having zealously sought in a great many ways to detect and apprehend it, we have not been able. But the time of the chaste man's pleasure is not such, rather it is wider and evident to all. Or rather, all his life is in pleasure, his conscience crowned, the waves laid, no disturbance from any quarter arising within him.

Since then this man's life is more in pleasure, while the life spent in love of pleasure is in dejection and disquiets; let us flee from licentiousness, let us keep hold on continence, that we may also obtain the good things to come, through the grace and mercy, etc., etc.

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