

1 Corinthians 2:1-2

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's sermon emphasizes the power of God in preaching Christ crucified over human wisdom and eloquence.

Scripture: Matthew 5:16, Matthew 16:18, Matthew 24:14, Matthew 28:20, John 20:29, Acts 4:32, 1 Corinthians 2:3-5, 2 Corinthians 5:7

Topics: "Gods Wisdom", "Spiritual Power"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the power of God's wisdom and the testimony of Christ crucified, emphasizing the humility and determination of Paul in preaching the Gospel without eloquence or persuasive words of wisdom, relying instead on the demonstration of the Spirit and power. He highlights Paul's weakness, fear, and trembling while preaching, showing that true faith should stand in the power of God, not in the wisdom of men. Chrysostom challenges the need for signs and miracles in the present time, pointing to the enduring credibility of the Gospel through the transformation of lives and the fulfillment of prophecies, urging believers to live lives of purity and selflessness to win others to the truth.

Transcript

And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.

Nothing was ever more prepared for combat than the spirit of Paul; or rather, I should say, not his spirit, (for he was not himself the inventor of these things,) but, nothing was ever equal to the grace working within him, which overcomes all things. For sufficient indeed is what had been said before to cast down the pride of the boasters about wisdom; nay, even a part of it had been enough. But to enhance the splendor of the victory, he contends anew for the points which he had been affirming; trampling upon the prostrate foe. Look at it in this way. He had brought forward the prophecy which says, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise. He had shown the wisdom of God, in that by means of what seemed to be foolishness, He destroyed the philosophy of the Gentiles; he had shown that the foolishness of God is wiser than men; he had shown that not only did He teach by untaught persons, but also chose untaught persons to learn of Him. Now he shows that both the thing itself which was preached, and the manner of preaching it, were enough to stagger people; and yet did not stagger them. As thus: not only, says he, are the disciples uneducated, but I myself also, who am the preacher.

Therefore he says, And I, brethren, (again he uses the word brethren, to smooth down the harshness of the utterance,) came not with excellency of speech, declaring unto you the testimony of God. What then? Tell me, had you chosen to come 'with excellency,' would you have been able? I, indeed, had I chosen, should not have been able; but Christ, if He had chosen, was able. But He would not, in order that He might render His trophy more brilliant. Wherefore also in a former passage, showing that it was His work which had been done, His will that the word should be preached in an unlearned manner, he said, For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the Gospel; not with wisdom of words. But far greater, yea, infinitely greater, than Paul's willing this, is the fact that Christ willed it.

Not therefore, says he, by display of eloquence, neither armed with arguments from without, do I declare the testimony of God. He says not the preaching, but the testimony of God; which word was itself sufficient to withhold him. For he went about preaching death: and for this reason he added, for I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. This was the meaning he meant to convey, that he is altogether destitute of the wisdom which is without; as indeed he was saying above, I came not with excellency of speech: for that he might have possessed this also is plain; for he whose garments raised the dead and whose shadow expelled diseases, much more was his soul capable of receiving eloquence. For this is a thing which may be taught: but the former transcends all art. He then who knows things beyond the reach of art, much more must he have had strength for lesser things. But Christ permitted not; for it was not expedient. Rightly therefore he says, For I determined not to know any thing: for I, too, for my part have just the same will as Christ.

And to me it seems that he speaks to them in a lower tone even than to any others, in order to repress their pride. Thus, the expression, I determined to know nothing, was spoken in contradistinction to the wisdom which is without. For I came not weaving syllogisms nor sophisms, nor saying unto you anything else than Christ was crucified. They indeed have ten thousand things to say, and concerning ten thousand things they speak, winding out long courses of words, framing arguments and syllogisms, compounding sophisms without end. But I came unto you saying no other thing than Christ was crucified. and all of them I out-stripped: which is a sign such as no words can express of the power of Him whom I preach.

1 Corinthians 2:3

2. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.

This again is another topic: for not only are the believers unlearned persons; not only is he that speaks unlearned; not only is the manner of the teaching of an unlearned cast throughout; not only was the thing preached of itself enough to stagger people; (for the cross and death were the message brought;) but together with these there were also other hindrances, the dangers, and the plots, and the daily fear, and the being hunted about. For the word weakness, with him in many places stands for the persecutions: as also elsewhere. My weakness which I had in my flesh you did not set at nought: Galatians 4:13-14 and again, If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern my weakness. 2 Corinthians 11:30 What [weakness]? The governor under Aretas the king guarded the city of the Damascenes, desirous to apprehend me. 2 Corinthians 5:32 And again, Wherefore I take pleasure in weakness: 2 Corinthians 12:10 then, saying in what, he added, In injuries, in necessities, in distresses. And here he makes the same statement; for having said, And I was in weakness, etc. he did not stop at this point, but explaining the word weakness makes mention of his dangers. He adds again, and in fear, and in much trembling, I was with you.

How do you say? Did Paul also fear dangers? He did fear, and dreaded them excessively; for though he was Paul, yet he was a man. But this is no charge against Paul, but infirmity of human nature; and it is to the praise of his fixed purpose of mind that when he even dreaded death and stripes, he did nothing wrong because of this fear. So that they who assert that he feared not stripes, not only do not honor him, but rather abridge greatly his praises. For if he feared not, what endurance or what self-restraint was there in bearing the dangers? I, for my part, on this account admire him; because being in fear, and not simply in fear, but even in trembling at his perils, he so ran as ever to keep his crown; and gave not in for any danger, in his task of purging out the world, and everywhere both by sea and land sowing the Gospel.

1 Corinthians 2:4

3. And my speech and my preaching was not in persuasive words of wisdom: that is, had not the wisdom from without. Now if the doctrine preached had nothing subtle, and they that were called were unlearned, and he that preached was of the same description, and thereto was added persecution, and trembling and fear; tell me, how did they overcome without Divine power? And this is why, having said, My speech and my preaching was not in persuasive words of wisdom, he added, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.

Do you perceive how the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness stronger? They for their part, being unlearned and preaching such a Gospel, in their chains and persecution overcame their persecutors. Whereby? Was it not by their furnishing that evidence which is of the Spirit? For this indeed is confessed demonstration. For who, tell me, after he had seen dead men rising to life and devils cast out, could have helped admitting it?

But seeing that there are also deceiving wonders, such as those of sorcerers, he removes this suspicion also. For he said not simply of power, but first, of the Spirit, and then, of power: signifying that the things done were spiritual.

It is no disparagement, therefore, that the Gospel was not declared by means of wisdom; rather it is a very great ornament. For this, it will be allowed, is the clearest token of its being divine and having its roots from above, out of the heavens. Wherefore he added also,

1 Corinthians 2:5

That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

Do you see how clearly in every way he has set forth the vast gain of this ignorance, and the great loss of this wisdom? For the latter made void the Cross, but the former proclaimed the power of God: the latter, besides their failing to discover any of those things which they most needed, set them also upon boasting of themselves; the former, besides their receiving the truth, led them also to pride themselves in God. Again, wisdom would have persuaded many to suspect that the doctrine was of man: this clearly demonstrated it to be divine, and to have come down from heaven. Now when demonstration is made by wisdom of words, even the worse oftentimes overcome the better, having more skill in words; and falsehood outstrips the truth. But in this case it is not so: for neither does the Spirit enter into an unclean soul, nor, having entered in, can it ever be subdued; even though all possible cleverness of speech assail it. For the demonstration by works and signs is far more evident than that by words.

4. But some one may say perhaps, If the Gospel is to prevail and has no need of words, lest the Cross be made of none effect; for what reason are signs withholden now? For what reason? Speakest thou in unbelief and not allowing that they were done even in the times of the Apostles, or do you truly seek to know? If in unbelief, I will first make my stand against this. I say then, If signs were not done at that time, how did they, chased, and persecuted, and trembling, and in chains, and having become the common enemies of the world, and exposed to all as a mark for ill usage, and with nothing of their own to allure, neither speech, nor show, nor wealth, nor city, nor nation, nor family, nor pursuit (■πιτ■δευμα,) nor glory, nor any such like thing; but with all things contrary, ignorance, meanness, poverty, hatred, enmity, and setting themselves against whole commonwealths, and with such a message to declare; how, I say, did they work conviction? For both the precepts brought much labor, and the doctrines many dangers. And they that heard and were to obey, had been brought up in luxury and drunkenness, and in great wickedness. Tell me then, how did they convince? Whence had they their credibility? For, as I have just said, If without signs they wrought conviction, far greater does the wonder appear. Do not then urge the fact that signs are not done now, as a proof that they were not done then. For as then they were usefully wrought; so now are they no longer so wrought.

Nor does it necessarily follow from discourse being the only instrument of conviction, that now the preaching is in wisdom. For both they who from the beginning sowed the word were unprofessional (■δι■τα) and unlearned, and spoke nothing of themselves; but what things they received from God, these they distributed to the world: and we ourselves at this time introduce no inventions of our own; but the things which from them we have received, we speak unto all. And not even now persuade we by argumentation; but from the Divine Scriptures and from the miracles done at that time we produce the proof of what we say. On the other hand, even they at that time persuaded not by signs alone, but also by discoursing. And the signs and the testimonies out of the Old Scriptures, not the cleverness of the things said, made their words appear more powerful.

5. How then, you will say, is it that signs were expedient then, and now inexpedient? Let us suppose a case, (for as yet I am contending against the Greek, and therefore I speak hypothetically of what must certainly come to pass,) let us, I say, suppose a case; and let the unbeliever consent to believe our affirmations, though it be only by way of concession: (κ■ν κατ■ συνδρομ■ν) for instance, That Christ will come. When then Christ shall come and all the angels with Him, and be manifested as God, and all things made subject unto Him; will not even the Greek believe? It is quite plain that he will also fall down and worship, and confess Him God, though his stubbornness exceed all reckoning. For who, at sight of the heavens opened and Him coming upon the clouds, and all the congregation of the powers above spread around Him, and rivers of fire coming on, and all standing by and trembling, will not fall down before Him, and believe Him God? Tell me, then; shall that adoration and knowledge be accounted unto the Greek for faith? No, on no account. And why not? Because this is not faith. For necessity has done this, and the evidence of the things seen, and it is not of choice, but by the vastness of the spectacle the powers of the mind are dragged along. It follows that by how much the more evident and overpowering the course of events, by so much is the part of faith abridged. For this reason miracles are not done now.

And that this is the truth, hear what He says unto Thomas John 20:29 Blessed are they who have not seen, and yet have believed. Therefore, in proportion to the evidence wherewith the miracle is set forth is the reward of faith lessened. So that if now also miracles were wrought, the same thing would ensue. For that then we shall no longer know Him by faith, Paul has shown, saying, For now we walk by faith, not by sight. 2 Corinthians 5:7. v■v not in the received text As at that time, although thou believe, it shall not be

imputed unto you, because the thing is so palpable; so also now, supposing that such miracles were done as were formerly. For when we admit things which in no degree and in no way can be made out by reasoning, then it is faith. It is for this that hell is threatened, but is not shown: for if it were shown, the same would again ensue.

6. Besides if signs be what you seek after, even now you may see signs, although not of the same kind; the numberless predictions and on an endless variety of subject: the conversion of the world, the self-denying (φιλοσοφία) course of the Barbarians, the change from savage customs, the greater intenseness of piety. What predictions? you will say. For all the things just mentioned were written after the present state of things had begun. When? Where? By whom? Tell me. How many years ago? Will you have fifty, or an hundred? They had not then, a hundred years ago, anything written at all. How then did the world retain the doctrines and all the rest, since memory would not be sufficient? How knew they that Peter was crucified? (νεσκολοπισθη) How could it have entered the minds of men who came after the events had taken place to foretell, for instance, that the Gospel should be preached in every part of the whole world? That the Jewish institutions should cease, and never return again? And they who gave up their lives for the Gospel, how would they have endured to see the Gospel adulterated? And how would the writers have won credit, miracles having ceased? And how could the writings have penetrated to the region of Barbarians, and of Indians, and unto the very bounds of the ocean, if the relators had not been worthy of credit? The writers, too, who were they? When, how, and why, did they write at all? Was it to gain glory to themselves? Why then inscribed they the books with other men's names? Why, from a wish to recommend the doctrine. As true, or as false? For if you say, they stuck to it, as being false; their joining it at all was out of all likelihood: but if as being truth, there was no need of inventions such as you speak of. And besides, the prophecies are of such a kind, as that even until now time has been unable to force aside the predicted course of things: (ως μὲν δυνασθαι βιαζασθαι χρὴν τα ερημνα) for the destruction indeed of Jerusalem took place many years ago; but there are also other predictions which extend along from that time until His coming; which examine as you please: for instance, this, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world: Matthew 28:20 and, Upon this Rock I will build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it: Matthew 16:18 and, This Gospel shall be preached unto all nations: Matthew 24:14 and that which the woman which was an harlot did: and many others more than these. Whence then the truth of this prediction if indeed it were a forgery? How did the gates of hell not prevail against the Church? How is Christ always with us? For had He not been with us, the Church would not have been victorious. How was the Gospel spread abroad in every part of the world? They also who have spoken against us are enough to testify the antiquity of the books; I mean, such as Celsus and he of Batanea, who came after him. For they, I suppose, were not speaking against books composed after their time.

[7] And besides, there is the whole world which with one consent has received the Gospel. Now there could not have been so great agreement from one end of the earth to the other, unless it had been the Grace of the Spirit; but the authors of the forgery would have been quickly found out. Neither could so great excellencies have originated from inventions and falsehoods. Do you not see the whole world coming in; error extinguished; the austere wisdom (φιλοσοφία) of the old monks shining brighter than the sun; the choirs of the virgins; the piety among Barbarians; all men serving under one yoke? For neither by us alone were these things foretold, but also from the beginning, by the Prophets. For you will not, I trow, cavil at their predictions also: for the books are with their enemies, and through the zeal of certain Greeks they have been transferred into the Greek tongue. Many things then do these also foretell concerning these matters, showing that it was God who should come among us.

[8] Why then do not all believe now? Because things have degenerated: and for this we are to blame. (For from hence the discourse is addressed unto us also.) For surely not even then did they trust to signs alone, but by the mode of life also many of the converts were attracted. For, Let your light so shine before men, says He, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. Matthew 5:16 And, They were all of one heart and one soul, neither said any man that anything of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had all things common; and distribution was made unto every man, according as he had need; Acts 4:32-35 and they lived an angelic life. And if the same were done now, we should convert the whole world, even without miracles. But in the meanwhile, let those who will be saved attend to the Scriptures; for they shall find there both these noble doings, and those which are greater than these. For it may be added that the Teachers themselves surpassed the deeds of the others; living in hunger, in thirst, and nakedness. But we are desirous of enjoying great luxury, and rest, and ease; not so they: they cried aloud, Even unto the present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling place. 1 Corinthians 4:11 And some ran from Jerusalem unto Illyricum, Romans 15:19 and another unto the country of the Indians, and another unto that of the Moors, and this to one part of the world, that to another. Whereas we have not the courage to depart even out of our own country; but seek for luxurious living and splendid houses and all other superfluities. For which of us ever was famished for the word of God's sake? Which ever abode in a wilderness? Which ever set out on a distant peregrination? Which of our teachers lived by the labor of his hands to assist others? Which endured death daily? Hence it is that they also who are with us have become slothful. For suppose that one saw soldiers and generals struggling with hunger, and thirst, and death, and with all dreadful things, and bearing cold and dangers and all like lions, and so prospering; then afterwards, relaxing that strictness, and becoming enervated, and fond of wealth, and addicted to business and bargains, and then overcome by their enemies, it were extreme folly to seek for the cause of all this. Now let us reason thus in our own case and that of our ancestors; for we too have become weaker than all, and are nailed down unto this present life.

And if one be found having a vestige of the ancient wisdom, leaving the cities and the market-places, and the society of the world, and the ordering of others, he betakes himself to the mountains: and if one ask the reason of that retirement, he invents a plea which cannot meet with allowance. For, says he, lest I perish too, and the edge of my goodness be taken off, I start aside. Now how much better were it for you to become less keen, and to gain others, than abiding on high to neglect your perishing brethren?

When, however, the one sort are careless about virtue, and those who do regard it withdraw themselves far from our ranks, how are we to subdue our enemies? For even if miracles were wrought now, who would be persuaded? Or who of those without would give heed unto us, our iniquity being thus prevalent? For so it is, that our upright living seems unto the many the more trustworthy argument of the two: miracles admitting of a bad construction on the part of obstinate bad men: whereas a pure life will have abundant power to stop the mouth of the devil himself.

9. These things I say, both to governors and governed; and, before all others, unto myself; to the end that the way of life shown forth in us may be truly admirable, that taking our appropriate stations, we may look down on all things present; may despise wealth, and not despise hell; overlook glory, and not overlook salvation; endure toil and labor here, lest we fall into punishment there. Thus let us wage war with the Greeks; thus let us take them captive with a captivity better than liberty.

But while we say these things without intermission, over and over, they occur very seldom. Howbeit, be they done or not, it is right to remind you of them continually. For if some are engaged in deceiving by their

fair speech, so much more is it the duty of those who allure back unto the truth, not to grow weary of speaking what is profitable. Again: if the deceivers make use of so many contrivances -- spending as they do money, and applying arguments, and undergoing dangers, and making a parade of their patronage -- much more should we, who are winning men from deceit, endure both dangers and deaths, and all things; that we may both gain ourselves and others, and become to our enemies irresistible, and so obtain the promised blessings, through the grace and loving-kindness, etc.

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