

1 Corinthians 4:17

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of humility, the power of God in true faith, and the necessity of correction within the church community.

Topics: "Virtue And Vice", "Christian Living"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of choosing virtue over vice, highlighting the ease and pleasure found in living a righteous life compared to the burdens and discomfort of pursuing worldly desires. He emphasizes the need to have a strong, courageous zeal for virtue, pointing out that true joy and security come from contentment and freedom from the love of material wealth. Chrysostom uses examples and analogies to illustrate how the pursuit of virtue leads to lasting happiness and fulfillment, contrasting it with the endless dissatisfaction and punishment that comes with greed and sinful desires.

Transcript

For this cause have I sent unto you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, who shall put you in remembrance of my ways which be in Christ Jesus.

Consider here also, I entreat, the noble soul, the soul more glowing and keener than fire: how he was indeed especially desirous to be present himself with the Corinthians, thus distempered and broken into parties. For he knew well what a help to the disciples his presence was and what a mischief his absence. And the former he declared in the Epistle to the Philippians, saying, Philippians 2:12. καὶ ὡς ἐν ἐμοὶ. in rec. text Not as in my presence only, but also now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. The latter he signifies in this Epistle, saying, 78 18 Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you; but I will come. He was urgent, it seems, and desirous to be present himself. But as this was not possible for a time, he corrects them by the promise of his appearance; and not this only, but also by the sending of his disciple. For this, he says, I have sent unto you Timothy. For this cause: how is that? Because I care for you as for children, and as having begotten you. And the message is accompanied with a recommendation of his person: Who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord. Now this he said, both to show his love of him, and to prepare them to look on him with respect. And not simply faithful, but, in the Lord; that is, in the things pertaining to the Lord. Now if in worldly things it is high praise for a man to be faithful, much more in things spiritual.

If then he was his beloved child, consider how great was Paul's love, in choosing to be separated from him for the Corinthian's sake, And if faithful also, he will be unexceptionable in his ministering to their affairs.

Who shall put you in remembrance. He said not, shall teach, lest they should take it ill, as being used to learn from himself. Wherefore also towards the end he says, 1 Corinthians 16:10-11 For he works the work of the Lord, as I also do. Let no man therefore despise him. For there was no envy among the Apostles, but they had an eye unto one thing, the edification of the Church. And if he that was employed was their inferior, they did as it were support (συνεκρ■τουν) him with all earnestness. Wherefore neither was he contented with saying, He shall put you in remembrance; but purposing to cut out their envy more completely -- for Timothy was young -- with this view, I say, he adds, my ways; not his, but mine; that is, his methods, (τ■ς ο■κονομ■ας.) his dangers, his customs, his laws, his ordinances, his Apostolical Canons, and all the rest. For since he had said, We are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling place: all these things, says he, he will remind you of; and also of the laws of Christ; for destroying all heresies. Then, carrying his argument higher, he adds, which be in Christ; ascribing all, as was his wont, unto the Lord, and on that ground establishing the credibility of what is to follow. Wherefore he subjoins, Even as I teach every where in every church. Nothing new have I spoken unto you: of these my proceedings all the other Churches are cognizant as well as you. Further: he calls them ways in Christ, to show that they have in them nothing human, and that with the aid from that source he does all things well.

2. And having said these things and so soothed them, and being just about to enter on his charge against the unclean person, he again utters words full of anger; not that in himself he felt so but in order to correct them: and giving over the fornicator, he directs his discourse to the rest, as not deeming him worthy even of words from himself; just as we act in regard to our servants when they have given us great offense.

Next, after that he had said, I send Timothy, lest they should thereupon take things too easily, mark what he says:

1 Corinthians 4:18

Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming unto you. For there he glances both at them and at certain others, casting down their highmindedness: since the love of preeminence is in fault, when men abuse the absence of their teacher for their own self-will. For when he addresses himself unto the people, observe how he does it by way of appeal to their sense of shame; when unto the originators of the mischief, his manner is more vehement. Thus unto the former he says, We are the offscouring of all: and soothing them he says, Not to shame you I write these things; but to the latter, Now as though I were not coming to you, some are puffed up; showing that their self-will argued a childish turn of mind. For so boys in the absence of their master wax more negligent.

This then is one thing here indicated; and another is that his presence was sufficient for their correction. For as the presence of a lion makes all living creatures shrink away, so also does that of Paul the corrupters of the Church.

1 Corinthians 4:19

And therefore he goes on, But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord will. Now to say this only would seem to be mere threatening. But to promise himself and demand from them the requisite proof by actions also; this was a course for a truly high spirit. Accordingly he added this too, saying,

And I will know, not the word of them which are puffed up, but the power. For not from any excellencies of their own but from their teacher's absence, this self-will arose. Which again itself was a mark of a scornful

mind towards him. And this is why, having said, I have sent Timothy, he did not at once add, I will come; but waited until he had brought his charge against them of being puffed up: after that he says, I will come. Since, had he put it before the charge, it would rather have been an apology for himself as not having been deficient, instead of a threat; nor even so (οὐτως so the King's ms. οὕτως the rec. text.) would the statement have been convincing. But as it is, placing it after the accusation, he rendered himself such as they would both believe and fear.

Mark also how solid and secure he makes his ground: for he says not simply, I will come: but, If the Lord will: and he appoints no set time. For since he might perhaps be tardy in coming, by that uncertainty he would fain keep them anxiously engaged. And, lest they should hereupon fall back again, he added, shortly,

3. And I will know, not the word of them that are puffed up, but the power. He said not, I will know not the wisdom, nor the signs, but what? not the word: by the term he employs at the same time depressing the one and exalting the other. And for a while he is setting himself against the generality of them who were countenancing the fornicator. For if he were speaking of him, he would not say, the power; but, the works, the corrupt works which he did.

Now why do you not seek after the word? Not because I am wanting in word but because all our doings are 'in power.' As therefore in war success is not for those who talk much but those who effect much; so also in this case, not speakers, but doers have the victory. You, says he, art proud of this fine speaking. Well, if it were a contest and a time for orators, you might reasonably be elated thereat: but if of Apostles preaching truth, and by signs confirming the same, why are you puffed up for a thing superfluous and unreal, and to the present purpose utterly inefficient? For what could a display of words avail towards raising the dead, or expelling evil spirits, or working any other such deed of wonder? But these are what we want now, and by these our cause stands. Whereupon also he adds,

1 Corinthians 4:20

For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power. By signs, says he, not by fine speaking, we have prevailed: and that our teaching is divine and really announces the Kingdom of Heaven we give the greater proof, namely, our signs which we work by the power of the Spirit. If those who are now puffed up desire to be some great ones; as soon as I have come, let them show whether they have any such power. And let me not find them sheltering themselves behind a pomp of words: for that kind of art is nothing to us.

1 Corinthians 4:21

4. What will you? Shall I come unto you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of meekness?

There is much both of terror and of gentleness in this saying. For to say, I will know, was the language of one as yet withholding himself: but to say, What will you? Must I come unto you with a rod? are the words of one thenceforth ascending the teacher's seat, and from thence holding discourses with them and taking upon him all his authority.

What means, with a rod? With punishment, with vengeance: that is, I will destroy; I will strike with blindness: the kind of thing which Peter did in the case of Sapphira, and himself in the case of Elymas the sorcerer. For henceforth he no longer speaks as bringing himself into a close comparison with the other

teachers, but with authority. And in the second Epistle too he appears to say the same, when he writes, Since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me.

Shall I come with a rod, or in love? What then? To come with a rod, was it not an instance of love? Of love it was surely. But because through his great love he shrinks back in punishing, therefore he so expresses himself.

Further; when he spoke about punishment, he said not, in a spirit of meekness, but, [simply,] with a rod: and yet of that too the Spirit was author. For there is a spirit of meekness, and a spirit of severity. He does not, however, choose so to call it, but from its milder aspect (■π■ τ■ν χρηστοτ■ρων.) And for a like reason also, God, although avenging Himself, has it often affirmed of Him that He is gracious and long-suffering, and rich in mercy and pity: but that He is apt to punish, once perhaps or twice, and sparingly, and that upon some urgent cause.

5. Consider then the wisdom of Paul; holding the authority in his own hands, he leaves both his and that in the power of others, saying, What will you? The matter is at your disposal.

For we too have depending on us both sides of the alternative; both falling into hell, and obtaining the kingdom: since God has so willed it. For, behold, says he, fire and water: whichever way you will, you may stretch forth your hand Sirach 15:16 And, If you be willing, and will hearken unto me, you shall eat the good of the land; Isaiah 1:19, but if you be not willing, the sword shall devour you.

But perhaps one will say, I am willing; (and no one is so void of understanding as not to be willing;) but to will is not sufficient for me. Nay, but it is sufficient, if you be duly willing, and do the deeds of one that is willing. But as it is, you are not greatly willing.

And let us try this in other things, if it seem good. For tell me, he that would marry a wife, is he content with wishing? By no means; but he looks out for women to advance his suit, and request friends to keep watch with him, and gets together money. Again, the merchant is not content with sitting at home and wishing, but he first hires a vessel, then selects sailors and rowers, then takes up money on interest, and is inquisitive about a market and the price of merchandise. Is it not then strange for men to show themselves so much in earnest about earthly things, but that when they are to make a venture for heaven, they should be content with wishing only? Rather I should say, not even in this do they show themselves properly in earnest. For he that wills a thing as he ought, puts also his hand unto the means which lead to the object of his desire. Thus, when hunger compels you to take nourishment, you wait not for the viands to come unto you of their own accord, but omittest nothing to gather victuals together. So in thirst, and cold and all other such things, you are industrious and duly prepared to take care of the body. Now do this in respect of God's kingdom also, and surely you shall obtain it.

For to this end God made you a free agent, that you might not afterwards accuse God, as though some necessity had bound you: but you, in regard of those very things wherein you have been honored, murmur.

For in fact I have often heard people say, But why did He then make my goodness depend on me? Nay, but how was He to bring you, slumbering and sleeping, and in love with all iniquity, and living delicately, and pampering yourself; how was He to bring you up to heaven? If He had, you would not have abstained from vice. For if now, even in the face of threatening, you do not turn aside from your wickedness; had he added no less than heaven as the end of your race, when would you have ceased waxing more careless

and worse by far? (χερῶν πολλῶν. πολλῶν Bened.)

Neither again will you be able to allege, He has showed me indeed what things were good but gave no help, for abundant also is His promise to you of aid.

6. But, say you, Virtue is burdensome and distasteful; while with vice great pleasure is blended; and the one is wide and broad, but the other strait and narrow.

Tell me then, are they respectively such throughout, or only from the beginning? For in fact what you here say, you say, not intending it, in behalf of virtue; so potent a thing is truth. For suppose there were two roads, the one leading to a furnace, and the other to a Paradise; and that the one unto the furnace were broad, the other unto Paradise, narrow; which road would you take in preference? For although you may now gainsay for contradiction's sake, yet things which are plainly allowed on all hands, however shameless, you will not be able to gainsay. Now that that way is rather to be chosen which has its beginning difficult but not its end, I will endeavor to teach you from what is quite obvious. And, if you please, let us first take in hand the arts. For these have their beginning full of toil, but the end gainful. But, say you, no one applies himself to an art without some one to compel him; for, you add, so long as the boy is his own master, he will choose rather to take his ease at first, and in the end to endure the evil, how great soever, than to live hardly at the outset, and afterwards reap the fruit of those labors. Well then, to make such a choice comes of a mind left to itself, (ῥόανικς δαίνοας) and of childish idleness: but the contrary choice, of sense and manliness. And so it is with us: were we not children in mind, we should not be like the child aforesaid, forsaken (ῥόν) as he is and thoughtless, but like him that has a father. We must cast out then our own childish mind, and not find fault with the things themselves; and we must set a charioteer over our conscience, who will not allow us to indulge our appetite, but make us run and strive mightily. For what else but absurdity is it to inure our children with pains at first unto pursuits which have laborious beginnings, but their end good and pleasant; while we ourselves in spiritual things take just the contrary turn?

And yet even in those earthly things it is not quite plain that the end will be good and pleasant: since before now untimely death, or poverty, or false accusation, or reverse of fortune, or other such things, of which there are many, have caused men after their long toil to be deprived of all its fruits. What is more, those who have such pursuits, though they succeed, it is no great gain which they will reap. For with the present life all those things are dissolved. But here, not for such fruitless and perishable things is our race, neither have we fears about the end; but greater and more secure is our hope after our departure hence. What pardon then can there be, what excuse for those who will not strip themselves for the evils to be endured for virtue's sake?

And do they yet ask, Wherefore is the way narrow? Why, thou dost not deem it right that any fornicator or lewd or drunken (καὶ τὸν μεθύοντων inserted from the King's ms.) person should enter into the courts of earthly kings; and do you claim for men to be let into heaven itself with licentiousness, and luxury, and drunkenness, and covetousness, and all manner of iniquity? And how can these things be pardonable?

7. Nay, you reply, I say not that, but why has not virtue a broad way? In good truth if we be willing, its way is very easy. For whether is easier, tell me; to dig through a wall and take other men's goods and so be cast into prison; or to be content with what you have and freed from all fear? I have not however said all. For whether is easier, tell me; to steal all men's goods and revel in few of them for a short time, and then to be racked and scourged eternally; or having lived in righteous poverty for a short time, to live ever after

in delights? (For let us not enquire as yet which is the more profitable, but for the present, which is the more easy.) Whether again is it pleasanter, to see a good dream and to be punished in reality; or after having had a disagreeable dream to be really in enjoyment? Of course the latter. Tell me then, In what sense do you call virtue harsh? I grant, it is harsh, tried by comparison with our carelessness. However, that it is really easy and smooth, hear what Christ says, Matthew 11:30 My yoke is easy, and My burden is light. But if you perceive not the lightness, plainly it is for want of courageous zeal; since where that is, even heavy things are light; and by the same rule where it is not, even light things are heavy. For tell me, what could be sweeter and more easily obtained than the banquet of manna? Yet the Jews were discontented, though enjoying such delightful fare. What more bitter than hunger and all the other hardships which Paul endured? Yet he leaped up, and rejoiced, and said, Colossians 1:24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings. What then is the cause? The difference of the mind. If then you frame this as it ought to be, you will see the easiness of virtue.

What then, say you, does she only become such through the mind of those who pursue her? She is such, not from their mind alone, but by nature as well. Which I thus prove: If the one had been throughout a thing painful, the other throughout of the contrary sort, then with some plausibility might some fallen persons have said that the latter was easier than the former. But if they have their beginnings, the one in hardship, the other in pleasure, but their respective ends again just opposite to these; and if those ends be both infinite, in the one the pleasure, in the other the burden; tell me, which is the more easy to choose?

Why then do many not choose that which is easy? Because some disbelieve; and others, who believe, have their judgment corrupt, and would prefer pleasure for a season to that which is everlasting. Is not this then easy? Not so: but this comes of a sick soul. And as the reason why persons in a fever long after cool drink is not upon calculation that the momentary luxury is pleasanter than being burned up from beginning to end, but because they cannot restrain their inordinate desire; so also these. Since if one brought them to their punishment at the very moment of their pleasure, assuredly they never would have chosen it. Thus you see in what sense vice is not an easy thing.

8. But if you will, let us try this same point over again by an example in the proper subject matter. Tell me, for instance, which is pleasanter and easier? (only let us not take again the desire of the many for our rule in the matter; since one ought to decide, not by the sick, but by the whole; just as you might show me ten thousand men in a fever, seeking things unwholesome upon choice to suffer for it afterwards; but I should not allow such choice;) which, I repeat, brings more ease, tell me; to desire much wealth, or to be above that desire? For I, for my part, think the latter. If you disbelieve it, let the argument be brought to the facts themselves.

Let us then suppose one man desiring much, another nothing. Which now is the better state, tell me, and which the more respectable? However, let that pass. For this is agreed upon, that the latter is a finer character than the former. And we are making no enquiry about this at present, but which lives the easier and pleasanter life? Well then: the lover of money will not enjoy even what he has: for that which he loves he cannot choose to spend; but would gladly even carve (κατακτείνει) himself out, and part with his flesh rather than with his gold. But he that despises wealth, gains this the while, that he enjoys what he has quietly and with great security, and that he values himself more than it. Which then is the pleasanter; to enjoy what one has with freedom, or to live under a master, namely wealth, and not dare to touch a single thing even of one's own? Why, it seems to me to be much the same as if any two men, having wives and loving them exceedingly, were not upon the same terms with them; but the one were allowed the presence and intercourse of his wife, the other not even permitted to come near his.

There is another thing which I wish to mention, indicating the pleasure of the one and the discomfort of the other. He that is greedy of gain will never be stayed in that desire, not only because it is impossible, for him to obtain all men's goods, but also because whatever he may have compassed, he counts himself to have nothing. But the despiser of riches will deem it all superfluous, and will not have to punish his soul with endless desires. I say, punish; for nothing so completely answers the definition of punishment as desire deprived of gratification; a thing too which especially marks his perverse mind. Look at it in this way. He that lusts after riches and has increased his store, he is the sort of person to feel as if he had nothing. I ask then, what more complicated than this disease? And the strange thing is not this only, but that although having, he thinks he has not the very things which are in his hold, and as though he had them not he bewails himself. If he even get all men's goods, his pain is but greater. And should he gain an hundred talents, he is vexed that he has not received a thousand: and if he received a thousand; he is stung to the quick that it is not ten thousand: and if he receive ten thousand, he utterly bemoans himself (κατακ■πτεται) because it is not ten times as much. And the acquisition of more to him becomes so much more poverty; for the more he receives so much the more he desires. So then, the more he receives, the more he becomes poor: since whoever desires more, is more truly poor. When then he has an hundred talents, is he not very poor? for he desires a thousand. When he has got a thousand, then he becomes yet poorer. For it is no longer a thousand as before, but ten thousand that he professes himself to want. Now if you say that to wish and not to obtain is pleasure, you seem to me to be very ignorant of the nature of pleasure.

9. To show that this sort of thing is not pleasure but punishment, take another case, and so let us search it out. When we are thirsty, do we not therefore feel pleasure in drinking because we quench our thirst; and is it not therefore a pleasure to drink because it relieves us from a great torment, the desire, I mean, of drinking? Every one, I suppose, can tell. But were we always to remain in such a state of desire, we should be as badly off as the rich man in the parable of Lazarus for the matter of punishment; for his punishment was just this that vehemently desiring one little drop, he obtained it not. And this very thing all covetous persons seem to me continually to suffer, and to resemble him where he begs that he may obtain that drop, and obtains it not. For their soul is more on fire than his.

Well indeed has one said, that all lovers of money are in a sort of dropsy; for as they, bearing much water in their bodies, are the more burnt up: so also the covetous, bearing about with them great wealth, are greedy of more. The reason is that neither do the one keep the water in the parts of the body where it should be, nor the other their desire in the limits of becoming thought.

Let us then flee this strange and craving (ξ■νην κα■ κεν■v: a play on the sound of the words,) disease; let us flee the root of all evils; let us flee that which is present hell; for it is a hell, the desire of these things. Only just lay open the soul of each, of him who despises wealth and of him who does not so; and you will see that the one is like the distracted, choosing neither to hear nor see any thing: the other, like a harbor free from waves: and he is the friend of all, as the other is the enemy. For whether one take any thing of his, it gives him no annoyance; or if whether, on the contrary, one give him anything, it puffs him not up; but there is a certain freedom about him with entire security. The one is forced to flatter and feign before all; the other, to no man.

If now to be fond of money is to be both poor and timid and a dissembler and a hypocrite and to be full of fears and great penal anguish and chastisement: while he that despises wealth has all the contrary enjoyments: is it not quite plain that virtue is the more pleasant?

Now we might have gone through all the other evils also whereby it is shown that there is no vice which has pleasure in it, had we not spoken before so much at large.

Wherefore knowing these things, let us choose virtue; to the end that we may both enjoy such pleasure as is here, and may attain unto the blessings which are to come, through the grace and loving-kindness, etc. etc.

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