

2 Corinthians 12:11

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of humility, love, and unity in the church while defending Paul's apostleship against false claims.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 11:3, 2 Corinthians 12:12-15

Topics: "Christian Humility", "Selfless Service"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of humility and selflessness, using the example of Paul's reluctance to boast about his own accomplishments. Paul emphasizes the necessity of not praising oneself unnecessarily, even when there are valid reasons to do so. Chrysostom highlights the significance of patience and enduring hardships as marks of a true Apostle, focusing on the selfless dedication to serving others. He urges the congregation to emulate Paul's sacrificial love and to avoid envy and discord, emphasizing the importance of unity and mutual support within the Church.

Transcript

I have become foolish in glorying; ye compelled me: for I ought to have been commended of you.

Having fully completed what he had to say about his own praises, he did not stay at this; but again excuses himself and asks pardon for what he said, declaring that his doing so was of necessity and not of choice. Still nevertheless, although there was necessity, he calls himself a fool. And when he began indeed, he said, As foolish receive me, and as in foolishness; but now, leaving out the 'as,' he calls himself foolish. For after he had established the point he wished by saying what he did, he afterwards boldly and unsparingly grapples with all failing of the sort, teaching all persons that none should ever praise himself where there is no necessity, seeing that even where a reason for it existed, Paul termed himself a fool [for so doing]. Then he turns the blame also of his so speaking not upon the false Apostles, but wholly upon the disciples. For ye, he says, compelled me. 'For if they gloried, but were not by doing so leading you astray nor causing your destruction, I should not have been thus led on to descend unto this discussion: but because they were corrupting the whole Church, with a view to your advantage I was compelled to become foolish.' And he did not say, 'For I feared lest if they obtained the highest estimation with you, they should sow their doctrines,' yet this indeed he set down above when he said, I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent deceived Eve, so your minds should be corrupted. 2 Corinthians 11:3 Here however he does not so express himself, but in a more commanding manner and with more authority, having gained boldness from what he had said, For I ought to have been commended of you. Then he also assigns the

reason; and again he mentions not his revelations nor his miracles only, but his temptations also.

For in nothing was I behind the chiefest Apostles. See how he here too again speaks out with greater authoritativeness. For, before indeed he said, I reckon I am not a whit behind, but here, after those proofs, he now boldly speaks out asserting the fact, as I said, thus absolutely. Not that even thus he departs from the mean, nor from his proper character. For as though he had uttered something great and exceeding his deserts, in that he numbered himself with the Apostles, he thus again speaks modestly, and adds,

2 Corinthians 12:12

Although I be nothing, the signs of an Apostle were wrought among you.

'Look not thou at this,' he says, 'whether I be mean and little, but whether you have not enjoyed those things which from an Apostle it was meet you should enjoy.' Yet he did not say 'mean,' but what was lower, nothing. For where is the good of being great, and of use to nobody? Even as there is no advantage in a skilful physician if he heals none of those that be sick. 'Do not then,' he says, 'scrutinize this that I am nothing, but consider that, that wherein ye ought to have been benefitted, I have failed in nothing, but have given proof of mine Apostleship. There ought then to have been no need for me to say anything.' Now he thus spoke, not as wanting to be commended, (for how should he, he who counted heaven itself to be a small thing in comparison with his longing after Christ?) but as desiring their salvation. Then lest they should say, 'And what is it to us, even though you were not a whit behind the very chiefest Apostles?' he therefore added,

The signs of an Apostle were wrought among you in all patience, and by signs and wonders. Amazing! What a sea of good works has he traversed in a few words! And observe what it is he puts first, patience. For this is the note of an Apostle, bearing all things nobly. This then he expressed shortly by a single word; but upon the miracles, which were not of his own achieving, he employs more. For consider how many prisons, how many stripes, how many dangers, how many conspiracies, how many sleet-showers of temptations, how many civil, how many foreign wars, how many pains, how many attacks he has implied here in that word, patience! And by signs again, how many dead raised, how many blind healed, how many lepers cleansed, how many devils cast out! Hearing these things, let us learn if we happen upon a necessity for such recitals to cut our good deeds short, as he too did.

2. Then lest any should say, Well! If you be both great, and have wrought many things, still you have not wrought such great things, as the Apostles have in the other Churches, he added,

2 Corinthians 12:13

For what is there wherein you were made inferior to the rest of the Churches?

'You were partakers,' he says, 'of no less grace than the others.' But perhaps some one will say, 'What can be the reason that he turns the discourse upon the Apostles, abandoning the contest against the false Apostles?' Because he is desirous to erect their spirits yet further, and to show that he is not only superior to them, but not even inferior to the great Apostles. Therefore, surely, when he is speaking of those he says, I am more; but when he compares himself with the Apostles, he considers it a great thing not to be behind, although he labored more than they. And thence he shows that they insult the Apostles, in holding him who is their equal second to these men.

Except it be that I myself was not a burden to you? Again he has pronounced their rebuke with great severity. And what follows is of yet more odious import.

Forgive me this wrong. Still, nevertheless, this severity contains both words of love and a commendation of themselves; if, that is, they consider it a wrong done to them, that the Apostle did not consent to receive anything from them, nor relied on them enough to be supported by them. 'If,' says he, 'ye blame me for this:' he did not say, 'You blame me wrongly,' but with great sweetness, 'I ask your pardon, forgive me this fault.' And observe his prudence. For because the mooting this continually tended to bring disgrace upon them, he continually softens it down; saying above, for instance, As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting shall not be stopped in me; 2 Corinthians 11:10 then again, Because I love you not? God knows.....But that I may cut off occasion from them that desire occasion, and that wherein they glory, they may be found even as we. Chap. 11:11, 12 And in the former Epistle What is my reward then? Verily, that when I preach the Gospel, I may make the Gospel without charge. 1 Corinthians 9:18 And here; Forgive me this wrong. For every where he avoids showing that it is on account of their weakness he takes not [from them]; and here not to wound them. And therefore here he thus expresses himself; 'If you think this to be an offense, I ask forgiveness.' Now he spoke thus, at once to wound and to heal. For do not say this, I pray you; 'If you mean to wound, why excuse it? But if you excuse it, why wound?' For this is wisdom's part, at once to lance, and to bind up the sore. Then that he may not seem, as he also said before, to be continually harping upon this for the sake of receiving from them, he remedies this [suspicion], even in his former Epistle, saying, But I write not these things that it may be so done in my case; for it were good for me rather to die, than that any man should make my glorying void; 1 Corinthians 9:15 but here with more sweetness and gentleness. How, and in what manner?

2 Corinthians 12:14

Behold this is the third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I seek not yours, but you: for the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children.

What he says is this; 'It is not because I do not receive of you that I do not come to you; nay, I have already come twice; and I am prepared to come this third time, and I will not be a burden to you.' And the reason is a noble one. For he did not say, 'because you are mean,' 'because you are hurt at it,' 'because, you are weak:' but what? For I seek not yours, but you. 'I seek greater things; souls instead of goods; instead of gold, salvation.' Then because there still hung about the matter some suspicion, as if he were displeased at them; he therefore even states an argument. For since it was likely they would say, 'Can you not have both us and ours?' he adds with much grace this excuse for them, saying, For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children; instead of teachers and disciples, employing the term parents and children, and showing that he does as a matter of duty what was not of duty. For Christ did not so command, but he says this to spare them; and therefore he adds also something further. For he did not only say that the children ought not to lay up, but also that the parents ought to. Therefore since it is meet to give,

2 Corinthians 12:15

I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls.

'For the law of nature indeed has commanded the parents to lay up for the children; but I do not do this only, but I give myself also besides.' And this lavishness of his, the not only not receiving, but giving also besides, is not in common sort but accompanied with great liberality, and out of his own want; for the

words, I will be spent, are of one who would imply this. 'For should it be necessary to spend my very flesh, I will not spare it for your salvation.' And that which follows contains at once accusation and love, though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved. 'And I do this,' he says, 'for the sake of those who are beloved by me, yet love me not equally.' Observe then, now, how many steps there are in this matter. He had a right to receive, but he did not receive; here is good work the first: and this, though in want; [good work] the second; and though preaching to them, the third; he gives besides, the fourth; and not merely gives, but lavishly too, the fifth; not money only, but himself, the sixth; for those who loved him not greatly, the seventh; and for those whom he greatly loved, the eighth.

3. Let us then also emulate this man! For it is a serious charge, the not loving even; but becomes more serious, when although one is loved he loves not. For if he that loves one that loves him be no better than the publicans; Matthew 5:46 he that does not so much as this ranks with the beasts; yea rather, is even below them. What do you say, O man? Do you not love him that loves you? What then do you live for? Wherein will you be of use hereafter? In what sort of matters? In public?

In private? By no means; for nothing is more useless than a man that knows not to love. This law even robbers have oftentimes respected, and murderers, and housebreakers; and having only taken salt with one, have been made his friends, letting the board change their disposition, and you that sharest not salt only, but words and deeds, and comings in and goings out, with him, do you not love? Nay: those that live impurely lavish even whole estates on their strumpets; and thou who hast a worthy love, are you so cold, and weak, and unmanly, as not to be willing to love, even when it costs you nothing?

'And who,' one asks, 'would be so vile, who such a wild beast, as to turn away from and to hate him that loves him?' Thou dost well indeed to disbelieve it, because of the unnaturalness of the thing; but if I shall show that there are many such persons, how shall we then bear the shame? For when you speak ill of him whom you love, when you hear another speak ill of him and you defend him not, when you grudge that he should be well accounted of, what sort of affection is this?

And yet it is not sufficient proof of love, not grudging, nor yet again not being at enmity or war with, but only supporting and advancing him that loves you: but when a man does and says everything to pull down his neighbor even, what can be more wretched than such a spirit? Yesterday and the day before his friend, you both conversed and ate with him: then because all at once you saw your own member highly thought of, casting off the mask of friendship, you put on that of enmity, or rather of madness.

For glaring madness it is, to be annoyed at the goodness of neighbors; for this is the act of mad and rabid dogs. For like them, these also fly at all men's faces, exasperated with envy. Better to have a serpent twining about one's entrails than envy crawling in us. For that it is often possible to vomit up by means of medicines, or by food to quiet: but envy twines not in entrails but harbors in the bosom of the soul, and is a passion hard to be effaced. And indeed if such a serpent were within one, it would not touch men's bodies so long as it had a supply of food; but envy, even though thou spread for it ever so endless a banquet, devours the soul itself, gnawing on every side, tearing, tugging, and it is not possible to find any palliative whereby to make it quit its madness, save one only, the adversity of the prosperous; so is it appeased, nay rather, not so even.

For even should this man suffer adversity, yet still he sees some other prosperous, and is possessed by the same pangs, and everywhere are wounds, everywhere blows. For it is not possible to live in the world and not see persons well reputed of. And such is the extravagance of this distemper, that even if one

should shut its victim up at home, he envies the men of old who are dead.

Now, that men of the world should feel in this way, is indeed a grievous thing, yet it is not so very dreadful; but that those who are freed from the turmoils of busy life should be possessed by this distemper, -- this is most grievous of all. And I could have wished indeed to be silent: and if silence took away too the disgrace of those doings, it were a gain to say nothing: if however, though I should hold my peace the doings will cry out more loudly than my tongue, no harm will accrue from my words, because of their parading these evils before us, but possibly some gain and advantage. For this distemper has infected even the Church, it has turned everything topsy-turvy, and dissevered the connection of the body, and we stand opposed to each other, and envy supplies us arms. Therefore great is the disruption. For if when all build up, it is a great thing if our disciples stand; when all at once are pulling down, what will the end be?

4. What are you doing, O man? You think to pull down your neighbor's; but before his you pull down your own. Do you see not them that are gardeners, that are husbandmen, how they all concur in one object? One has dug the soil, another planted, a third carefully covered the roots, another waters what is planted, another hedges it round and fortifies it, another drives off the cattle; and all look to one end, the safety of the plant. Here, however, it is not so: but I plant indeed myself, and another shakes and disturbs [the plant.] At least, allow it to get nicely fixed, that it may be strong enough to resist the assault. You destroy not my work, but abandon your own. I planted, you ought to have watered. If then thou shake it, you have torn it up by the roots, and hast not wherein to display your watering. But you see the planter highly esteemed. Fear not: neither am I anything, nor thou. For neither is he that plants nor he that waters any thing; 1 Corinthians 3:7 one's is the work, God's. So it is with Him you fight and warrest, in plucking up what is planted.

Let us then at length come to our sober senses again, let us watch. For I fear not so much the battle without, as the fight within; for the root also, when it is well fitted into the ground, will suffer no damage from the winds; but if it be itself shaken, a worm gnawing through it from within, the tree will fall, even though none molest it. How long gnaw we the root of the Church like worms? For of earth such imaginings are begotten also, or rather not of earth, but of dung, having corruption for their mother; and they cease not from the detestable flattery that is from women.

Let us at length be generous men, let us be champions of philosophy, let us drive back the violent career of these evils. For I behold the mass of the Church prostrate now, as though it were a corpse. And as in a body newly dead, one may see eyes and hands and feet and neck and head, and yet no one limb performing its proper office; so, truly, here also, all who are here are of the faithful, but their faith is not active; for we have quenched its warmth and made the body of Christ a corpse.

Now if this sounds awful when said, it is much more awful when it appears in actions. For we have indeed the name of brothers, but do the deeds of foes; and while all are called members, we are divided against each other like wild beasts. I have said this not from a desire to parade our condition, but to shame you and make you desist. Such and such a man goes into a house; honor is paid to him; you ought to give God thanks because your member is honored and God is glorified; but you do the contrary: you speak evil of him to the man that honored him, so that you trip up the heels of both, and, besides, disgracest yourself.

And wherefore, wretched and miserable one? Have you heard your brother praised, either among men or women? Add to his praises, for so you shall praise yourself also. But if you overthrow the praise, first, you have spoken evil of yourself, having so acquired an ill character, and you have raised him the higher.

When you hear one praised, become thou a partner in what is said; if not in your life and virtue, yet still in rejoicing over his excellencies. Hath such an one praised?

Do thou too admire: so shall he praise you also as good and candid. Fear not, as though you were ruining your own interest by your praises of another: for this is [rather] the result of accusation of him. For mankind is of a contentious spirit; and when it sees you speaking ill of any, it heaps on its praises, wishing to mortify by so doing; and reprobates those that are accusers, both in its own mind and to others. Do you see what disgrace we are the causes of to ourselves?

How we destroy and rend the flock? Let us at length be members (of one another), let us become one body. And let him that is praised repudiate the praises, and transfer the encomium to his brother; and let him that hears another praised, feel pleasure to himself. If we thus come together ourselves, we shall also draw unto ourselves the Head; but if we live parted from each other, we shall also put from us the aid which comes from thence; and when that is put aside, the body will receive great damage, not being bound together from above.

That this then may not happen, let us, banishing ill will and envy, and despising what the many may think of us, embrace love and concord. For thus we shall obtain both the present good things and those to come; whereunto may we all attain, through the grace and love towards men of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom to the Father together with the Holy Ghost, be glory, might, honor, now and forever, and world without end. Amen.

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