

2 Corinthians 12:16-18

by St. John Chrysostom

Paul defends himself against accusations of self-interest and emphasizes the importance of the Spirit's guidance in his ministry, while also warning against the dangers of envy and strife.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:20

Topics: "Spiritual Integrity", "Christian Virtue"

Description

John Chrysostom delves into Paul's defense regarding money matters, emphasizing his integrity and strictness in not taking advantage of the Corinthians, even through others. Paul expresses his concern for the Corinthians' spiritual well-being, fearing he may find them in a state of sin upon his return. He humbly acknowledges the possibility of being humbled by God if he needs to address their sins. Chrysostom highlights the power of virtue over vice, using the example of John the Baptist's righteous rebuke and the consequences of Herodias' sinful actions. He encourages believers to endure suffering and injustice, following the path of the saints to receive heavenly rewards.

Transcript

But be it so, I myself did not burden you: but being crafty, I caught you with guile. Did I take advantage of you by any one of them whom I have sent unto you? I exhorted Titus, and with him I sent the brother. Did Titus take any advantage of you? Walked we not by the same spirit? Walked we not in the same steps?

Paul has spoken these words very obscurely, but not without a meaning or purpose. For seeing he was speaking about money, and his defense on that score, it is reasonable that what he says must be wrapt in obscurity. What then is the meaning of what he says? He had said, 'I received not, nay I am ready even to give besides, and to spend;' and much discourse is made on this subject both in the former Epistle and in this. Now he says something else, introducing the subject in the form of an objection and meeting it by anticipation.

What he says is something like this; 'I indeed have not made a gain of you: but perhaps some one has it to say that I did not receive [of you] indeed myself, but, being crafty, I procured those who were sent by me to ask for something of you as for themselves, and through them I myself received, yet keeping myself clear of seeming to receive, by receiving through others. But none can have this to say either; and you are witnesses.' Wherefore also he proceeds by question, saying, I exhorted Titus, and with him I sent the brother.

Did Titus make a gain of you? 'walked he not just as I walked.' That is to say, neither did he receive. Do you see how intense a strictness [is here], in that he not only keeps himself clear of that receiving, but so modulates those also who are sent by him that he may not give so much as a slight pretence to those who were desirous of attacking him. For this is far greater than that which the Patriarch did. Genesis 14:24 For he indeed, when he had returned from his victory, and the king would have given him the spoil, refused to accept anything save what the men had eaten; but this man neither himself enjoyed [from them] his necessary food, nor allowed his partners to partake of such: thus abundantly stopping the mouths of the shameless.

Wherefore he makes no assertion, nor does he say that they did not receive either; but what was far more than this, he cites the Corinthians themselves as witnesses that they had received nothing, that he may not seem to be witnessing in his own person, but by their verdict; which course we are accustomed to take in matters fully admitted and about which we are confident. 'For tell me,' he says, 'Did any one of those who were sent by us make unfair gain of you?' He did not say, 'Did any one receive anything from you?' but he calls the things 'unfair gain;' attacking them and shaming them exceedingly, and showing that to receive of an unwilling [giver] is 'unfair gain.'

And he said not 'did Titus.' but, did any? 'For you cannot say this either,' he says, 'that such an one certainly did not receive, but another did. No single one of those who came did so.' I exhorted Titus. This too is severely said. For he did not say, 'I sent Titus,' but, 'I exhorted' him; showing that if he had received even, he would have done so justly; but, nevertheless, even so he remained pure. Wherefore he asks them again, saying, Did Titus take any advantage of you?

Walked we not by the same spirit? What means, by the same spirit? He ascribes the whole to grace and shows that the whole of this praise is the good result not of our labors, but of the gift of the Spirit and of Grace. For it was a very great instance of grace that although both in want and hunger they would receive nothing for the edification of the disciples. Walked we not in the same steps? That is to say, they did not depart the least from this strictness, but preserved the same rule entire.

2 Corinthians 12:19

2. Again, think ye that we are excusing ourselves unto you?

Do you see how he is continually in fear, lest he should incur the suspicion of flattery? Do you see an Apostle's prudence, how constantly he mentions this? For he said before, We commend not ourselves again, but give you occasion to glory; 2 Corinthians 5:12 and in the commencement of the Epistle, Do we need letters of commendation? 2 Corinthians 3:1

But all things are for your edifying. Again he is soothing them. And he does not here either say clearly, 'on this account we receive not, because of your weakness;' but, 'in order that we may edify you;' speaking out indeed more clearly than he did before, and revealing that wherewith he travailed; but yet without severity. For he did not say, 'because of your weakness;' but, 'that you may be edified.'

2 Corinthians 12:20

For I fear, lest by any means when I come, I should not find you such as I would, and should myself be found of you such as you would not.

He is going to say something great and offensive. And therefore he also inserts this excuse [for it], both by saying, All things are for your edifying, and by adding, I fear, softening the harshness of what was presently going to be said. For it was not here out of arrogance nor the authority of a teacher, but out of a father's tender concern, when he is more fearful and trembling than the sinners themselves at that which is likely to reform them. And not even so does he run them down or make an absolute assertion; but says doubtingly, lest by any means when I come, I should not find you such as I would. He did not say, 'not virtuous,' but not such as I would, everywhere employing the terms of affection. And the words, I should find, are of one who would express what is out of natural expectation, as are also those, I shall be found by you. For the thing is not of deliberate choice, but of a necessity originating with you. Wherefore he says, I should be found such as you would not. He said not here, such as I would not, but, with more severity, such as you wish not. For it would in that case become his own will, not indeed what he would first have willed, but his will nevertheless. For he might indeed have said again, 'such as I would not,' and so have showed his love: but he wishes not to relax his hearer. Yea rather, his words would in that case have been even harsher; but now he has at once dealt them a smarter blow and showed himself more gentle. For this is the characteristic of his wisdom; cutting more deeply, to strike more gently. Then, because he had spoken obscurely, he unveils his meaning, saying,

Lest there be strife, jealousy, wraths, backbitings, whisperings, swellings.

And what he might well put first, that he puts last: for they were very proud against him. Therefore, that he may not seem principally to be seeking his own, he first mentions what was common. For all these things were gendered of envy, their slanderings, accusations, dissensions. For just like some evil root, envy produced wrath, accusation, pride, and all those other evils, and by them was increased further,

2 Corinthians 12:21

And lest when I come again, my God should humble me among you.

And the word again, too, is as smiting them. For he means, 'What happened before is enough;' as he said also in the beginning [of the Epistle], to spare you, I came not as yet to Corinth. Chap. 1:18, 23 Do you see how he shows both indignation and tender affection? But what means, will humble me? And yet this is glorious rather, to accuse, to take vengeance, to call to account, to be seated in the place of judge; howbeit he calls it a humbling. So far was he from being ashamed of that [cause of] humbling, because, his bodily presence was weak, and his speech of no account, that he wished to be even for ever in that case, and deprecated the contrary. And he says this more clearly as he proceeds; and he counts this to be especially humbling, to be involved in such a necessity as the present, of punishing and taking vengeance. And wherefore did he not say, 'lest when I come I shall be humbled,' but, lest when I come my God will humble me. 'Because had it not been for His sake, I should have paid no attention nor been anxious. For it is not as possessing authority and for my own pleasure, that I demand satisfaction, but because of His commandment.' Now above, indeed, he expressed himself thus, I shall be found; here, however, he relaxes and adopts milder and gentler language, saying,

I shall mourn for many of them who have sinned. Not simply, who have sinned, but,

Who have not repented. And he said not, 'all,' but many; nor made it clear who these were either, thereby making the return unto repentance easy to them; and to make it plain that a repentance is able to right transgressions, he bewails those that repent not, those who are incurably diseased, those who continue in their wounds. Observe then Apostolic virtue, in that, conscious of no evil in himself, he laments over the

evils of others and is humbled for other men's transgressions. For this is the special mark of a teacher, so to sympathize with the calamities of his disciples, and to mourn over the wounds of those who are under him. Then he mentions also the specific sin.

Of the lasciviousness and uncleanness which they committed. Now in these words he alludes indeed to fornication; but if one carefully examine the subject, every kind of sin can be called by this name. For although the fornicator and adulterer is preeminently styled unclean, yet still the other sins also produce uncleanness in the soul. And therefore it is that Christ also calls the Jews unclean, not charging them with fornication only, but with wickedness of other kinds as well. Wherefore also He says that they made the outside clean, and that not the things which enter in defile the man, but those which come out from him; Matthew 15:11 and it is said in another place, Every one that is proud in heart is unclean before the Lord. Proverbs 16:5. Septuagint

3. For nothing is purer than virtue, nothing uncleaner than vice; for the one is brighter than the sun, the other more stinking than mire. And to this they will themselves bear witness, who are wallowing in that mire and living in that darkness; at any rate, when one prepares them a little to see clearly. For as long as they are by themselves, and inebriate with the passion, just as if living in darkness they lie in unseemly wise to their much infamy, conscious even then where they are, although not fully; but after they have seen any of those who live in virtue reproving them or even showing himself, then they understand their own wretchedness more clearly; and as if a sunbeam had darted upon them, they cover up their own unseemliness and blush before those who know of their doings, yea, though the one be a slave and the other free, though the one be a king and the other a subject. Thus when Ahab saw Elijah, he was ashamed, even when he had as yet said nothing; standing convicted by the mere sight of him; and when his accuser was silent, he pronounced a judgment condemnatory of himself; uttering the language of such as are caught, and saying, You have found me, O mine enemy! 1 Kings 21:20 Thus Elijah himself conversed with that tyrant then with great boldness. Thus Herod, unable to bear the shame of those reproofs, (which [shame] the sound of the prophet's tongue with mighty and transparent clearness exposed more evidently,) cast John into the prison: like one who was naked and attempting to put out the light, that he might be in the dark again; or rather he himself dared not put it out, but, as it were, placed it in the house under a bushel; and that wretched and miserable woman compelled it to be done. But not even so could they cover the reproof, nay, they lit it up the more. For both they that asked, Wherefore does John dwell in prison? Learned the reason, and all they that since have dwelt on land or sea, who then lived, or now live, and who shall be hereafter, both have known and shall know clearly these wicked tragedies, both that of their lewdness and that of their bloodguiltiness, and no time shall be able to wipe out the remembrance of them.

So great a thing is virtue: so immortal is its memory, so completely even by words only does it strike down its adversaries. For wherefore did he cast him into the prison? Wherefore did he not despise him? Was he going to drag him before the judgment-seat? Did he demand vengeance upon him for his adultery? Was not what he said then simply a reproof? Why then does he fear and tremble? Was it not words and talk merely? But they stung him more than deeds. He led him not to any judgment-seat, but he dragged him before that other tribunal of conscience; and he sets as judges upon him all who freely gave their verdicts in their thought. Therefore the tyrant trembled, unable to endure the lustre of virtue. Do you see how great a thing is philosophy? It made a prisoner more lustrous than a king, and the latter is afraid and trembles before him. He indeed only put him in bonds; but that polluted woman rushed on to his slaughter also, although the rebuke was leveled rather against him, [than herself.] For he did not then meet her and say,

Why do you cohabit with the king? Not that she was guiltless, (how should she be so?) but he wished by that other means to put all to rights. Wherefore he blamed the king, and yet not him with violence of manner. For he did not say, O polluted and all-polluted and lawless and profane one, you have trodden under foot the law of God, you have despised the commandments, you have made your might law. None of these things; but even in his rebukings great was the gentleness of the man, great his meekness. For, It is not lawful for you, he says, to have your brother Philip's wife. The words are those of one who teaches rather than reproveth, instructs rather than chastens, who composes to order rather than exposes, who amends rather than tramples on him. But, as I said, the light is hateful to the thief, and the mere sight of the just man is odious to sinners; for he is grievous unto us even to behold. Wisdom 2:15 For they cannot bear his radiance, even as diseased eyes cannot bear the sun's. But to many of the wicked he is grievous not to behold only, but even to hear of. And therefore that polluted and all-polluted woman, the procuress of her girl, yea rather her murderess, although she had never seen him nor heard his voice, rushed on to his slaughter; and prepares her whom she brought up in lasciviousness to proceed also to murder, so extravagantly did she fear him.

4. And what says she? Give me here in a charger the head of John the Baptist. Matthew 14:8 Whither do you rush over precipices, wretched and miserable one? What? Is the accuser before you? Is he in sight and troubles you? Others said, He is grievous unto us even to behold; but to her, as I said, he was grievous to even hear of. Wherefore she says, Give me here in a charger the head of John. And yet because of you he inhabits a prison, and is laden with chains, and you are free to wanton over your love and to say, 'So completely have I subdued the king, that though publicly reproached he yielded not, nor desisted from his passion, nor tore asunder his adulterous connection with me, but even put him that reproached him in bonds.'

Why are you mad and rabid, when even after that reproof of his sin you retain your paramour? Why do you seek a table of furies, and preparest a banquet of avenging demons? Do you see how nothing-worth, how cowardly, how unmanly, is vice; how when it shall most succeed, it then becomes more feeble? For this woman was not so much disturbed before she had cast John into prison, as she is troubled after he is bound, and she is urgent, saying, Give me here in a charger the head of John.

And wherefore so? 'I fear,' she says, 'lest there be any hushing up of his murder, lest any should rescue him from his peril.' And wherefore do you not require the whole corpse, but the head? 'The tongue,' she says, 'that pained me, that I long to see silent.' But the contrary will happen, as indeed it also has done, thou wretched and miserable one! It will cry louder afterwards, when it is cut out. For then indeed it cried in Judaea only, but now it will reach to the ends of the world; and wheresoever you enter into a church, whether it be among the Moors, or among the Persians, or even unto the British isles themselves, you hear John crying, It is not lawful for you to have your brother Phillip's wife.

But she, unknowing to reason in any such way, urges and presses, and thrusts on the senseless tyrant to the murder, fearing lest he change his mind. But from this too learn thou again the power of virtue. Not even when he was shut up and bound and silent, does she bear the righteous man. Do you see how weak a thing vice is? How unclean? For in the place of meats it brings in a human head upon a charger. What is more polluted, what more accursed, what more immodest, than that damsel?

What a voice she uttered in that theatre of the devil, in that banquet of demons! Do you see this tongue and that; the one bringing healthful medicines, the other one with poison on it, and made the purveyor to a devilish banquet. But wherefore did she not command him to be murdered within there, at the feast, when

her pleasure would have been greater? She feared lest if he should come there and be seen, he should change them all by his look, by his boldness. Therefore surely it is that she demands his head, wishing to set up a bright trophy of fornication; and give it to her mother.

Do you see the wages of dancing, do you see the spoils of that devilish plot? I mean not the head of John, but her paramour himself. For if one examine it carefully, against the king that trophy was set up, and the victress was vanquished, and the beheaded was crowned, and proclaimed victor, even after his death shaking more vehemently the hearts of the offenders. And that what I have said is no [mere] boast, ask of Herod himself; who, when he heard of the miracles of Christ, said, This is John, he is risen from the dead: and therefore do these powers work in him.

Matthew 14:2 So lively was the fear, so abiding the agony he retained; and none had power to cast down the terror of his conscience, but that incorruptible Judge continued to take him by the throat, and day by day to demand of him satisfaction for the murder. Knowing, then, these things, let us not fear to suffer evil, but to do evil; for that indeed is victory, but this defeat.

Wherefore also Paul said, Why not rather take wrong, why not rather be defrauded. Nay, you yourselves do wrong, and defraud, and that your brethren. For by the suffering evil [come] those crowns, those prizes, that proclamation [of victory]. And this may be seen in all the saints. Since then they all were thus crowned, thus proclaimed, let us too travel this road, and let us pray indeed that we enter not into temptation; but if it should come, let us make stand with much manliness and display the proper readiness of mind, that we may obtain the good things to come, 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 for ever, and world without end. Amen.

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