

2 Corinthians 13:1

by St. John Chrysostom

Paul's sermon emphasizes the importance of self-examination, faith, and the power of Christ working through him despite persecution and weakness.

Topics: "Church Discipline", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about Paul's wisdom and tender affection in his dealings with the Corinthians, emphasizing how he warns repeatedly before taking action, mirroring God's approach of warning before punishing. Paul's procrastination in punishment is to give them a chance to repent and avoid chastisement. He highlights the importance of establishing truth through witnesses and the power of Christ working in believers. Chrysostom explains the concept of weakness in different contexts and how Christ's crucifixion through weakness actually displays His power. He urges the Corinthians to examine themselves, test their faith, and strive for perfection, while emphasizing the dangers of vain-glory and the pursuit of worldly shadows over eternal truths.

Transcript

This is the third time I am coming to you. At the mouth of two witnesses or three shall every word be established.

The wisdom of Paul and his much tender affection, one may observe in many other circumstances, but especially in this, his being so abundant and vehement in his admonitions, but so tardy and procrastinating in his punishments. For he did not chastise them immediately on their sinning, but warned them once and again; and not even so, upon their paying no attention, does he exact punishment, but warns again, saying, This is the third time I am coming to you; and 'before I come I write again.' Then, that his procrastinating may not produce indifference, see how he corrects this result also, by threatening continually and holding the blow suspended over them, and saying, If I come again I will not spare; and lest when I come again I should mourn for many. These things, then, he does and speaks, in this too imitating the Lord of all: because that God also threatens indeed continually and warns often, but not often chastises and punishes. And so in truth also does Paul, and therefore he said also before, To spare you I came not as yet to Corinth. What is, to spare you? Lest finding you to have sinned and to continue unamended, I should visit with chastisement and punishment. And here, This is the third time I am coming to you. At the mouth of two witnesses or three shall every word be established. He joins the unwritten to the written, as he has done also in another place, saying, He that is joined to an harlot is one body; for the

two, says He, shall become one flesh. 1 Corinthians 6:16 Howbeit, this was spoken of lawful marriage; but he diverted its application unto this thing conveniently, so as to terrify them the more. And so he does here also, setting his comings and his warnings in the place of witnesses. And what he says is this: 'I spoke once and again when I was with you; I speak also now by letter. And if indeed ye attend to me, what I desired is accomplished; but if you pay no attention, it is necessary henceforth to stop speaking, and to inflict the punishment.' Wherefore he says,

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I have said beforehand, and I do say beforehand when I was present the second time; so now being absent I write to them that sinned heretofore and to all the rest, that if I come again, I will not spare.

'For if at the mouth of two witnesses or three every word shall be established, and I have come twice and spoken, and speak now also by this Epistle; it follows, I must after this keep my word. For think not, I pray you, that my writing is of less account than my coming; for as I spoke when present, so now I write also when absent.' Do you see his fraternal solicitude? Do you see forethought becoming a teacher? He neither kept silence nor punished, but he both foretells often, and continues ever threatening, and puts off the punishment, and if they should continue unamended, then he threatens to bring it to the proof. 'But what did you tell them before when present, and when absent writest?' That if I come again, I will not spare. Having showed before that he is unable to do this unless he is compelled, and having called the thing a mourning, and a humbling; (for he says, lest my God should humble me before you, and I should mourn for them that have sinned heretofore, and not repented; 2 Corinthians 12:21) and having made his excuse unto them, namely, that he had told them before, once and twice and thrice, and that he does and contrives all he can so as to hold back the punishment, and by the fear of his words to make them better, he then used this displeasing and terrifying expression, If I come again, I will not spare. He did not say, 'I will avenge and punish and exact satisfaction:' but again expresses even punishment itself in paternal language; showing his tender affection, and his heart to be grieved along with them; because that he always to spare them put off. Then that they may not think now also that there will be again a putting off, and merely a threat in words, therefore he both said before, At the mouth of two witnesses or three shall every word be established; and [now], If I come again, I will not spare. Now what he means is this: 'I will no longer put off, if (which God forbid) I find you unamended; but will certainly visit it, and make good what I have said.'

2. Then with much anger and vehement indignation against those who make a mock of him as weak, and ridicule his presence, and say, his presence is weak, and his speech of no account; 2 Corinthians 10:10 aiming his efforts at these men, he says,

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Seeing that you seek a proof of Christ that speaks in me.

For he said this, dealing at once a blow at these, and at the same time lashing those also. Now what he means is this; 'Since you are desirous of proving whether Christ dwells in me, and call me to an account, and on this score make a mock of me as mean and despicable, as if I were destitute of that Power; you shall know that we are not destitute, if you give us occasion, which God forbid.' What then? Tell me. Do you therefore punish, because they seek a proof? 'No,' he says; for had he sought this, he would have punished them at the first on their sinning, and would not have put off. But that he does not seek this, he has shown more clearly as he proceeds, saying, Now I pray that you do no evil, not that we may appear

approved, but that you may be approved, though we be as reprobates. 2 Corinthians 13:7

He does not employ those words then as assigning a reason, but rather in indignation, rather as attacking those that despise him. 'For,' he says, 'I have no desire indeed to give you such a proof, but if you yourselves should furnish cause and should choose to challenge me, you shall know by very deeds.' And observe how grievous he makes what he says. For he said not, 'Since ye seek a proof of me,' but of Christ that speakest in me, showing that it was against Him they sinned. And he did not say merely, 'dwelling in me,' but speaking in me, showing that his words are spiritual. But if he does not display His power nor punish, (for thenceforward the Apostle transferred what he said from himself to Christ, thus making his threat more fearful,) it is not from weakness; for He can do it: but from long suffering. Let none then think His forbearance to be weakness. For why do you marvel that He does not now proceed against sinners, nor in his forbearance and long suffering exacts satisfaction, seeing that He endured even to be crucified, and though suffering such things punished not? Wherefore also he added,

Who to you-ward is not weak, but is mighty in you. For though He was crucified through weakness, yet He lives through the Power of God.

These words have much obscurity and give disturbance to the weaker sort. Wherefore it is necessary to unfold them more clearly, and to explain the signification of the expression as to which the obscurity exists, that no one may be offended, even of the simpler sort. What then, at all, is that which is here said, and what the term weakness designates, and in what signification it is used, it is necessary to learn. For the term is indeed one, but it has many meanings. For bodily sickness is termed 'weakness:' whence it is even said in the Gospel, Behold, he whom You love is weak, John 11:3-4 concerning Lazarus; and He Himself said, This weakness is not unto death; and Paul, speaking of Epaphras, For indeed he was weak near unto death, but God had mercy on him; Philippians 2:57 and of Timothy, Use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your often weaknesses. 1 Timothy 5:23 For all these denote bodily sickness. Again, the not being established firmly in the faith is called 'weakness;' the not being perfect and complete. And denoting this Paul said, Him that is weak in the faith receive ye but not to doubtful disputations: Romans 14:1-2 and again, One believes that he may eat all things; another, who is weak, eats herbs, denoting him who is weak in the faith. Here then are two significations of the term 'weakness;' there is yet a third thing which is called 'weakness.' What then is this? Persecutions, plottings, insults, trials, assaults. And denoting this Paul said, For this thing I besought the Lord thrice. And He said to me, My grace is sufficient for you: for My power is made perfect in weakness. Chap. 12:8, 9 What is in weakness? In persecutions, in dangers, in trials, in plottings, in deaths. And denoting this he said, Wherefore, I take pleasure in weakness. Then showing what kind of weakness he means, he spoke not of fever, nor of doubt about the faith; but what? in injuries, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For when I am weak, then am I strong. 2 Corinthians 12:10 That is to say 'when I am persecuted, when I am driven up and down, when I am plotted against, then am I strong, then the rather I prevail over, and get the better of them that plot against me, because that grace rests upon me, more largely. It is then in this third sense that Paul uses weakness; and this is what he means by it; aiming again, as I said also before, at that point, his seeming to them to be mean and contemptible. For indeed he had no desire to boast, nor to seem to be what he really was, nor yet to display the power which he possessed of punishing and revenging; whence also he was accounted to be mean. When then as so accounting they were going on in great indifference and insensibility, and repented not of their sins, he seizes a favorable opportunity, discourses with much vigor upon these points also, and shows that it was not from weakness he did nothing, but from long-suffering.

3. Then, as I said, by transferring the argument from himself to Christ, he enhances their fear, he increases his threat. And what he says is this; 'for even supposing I should do something and chastise and take vengeance on the guilty ones, is it I that chastise and take vengeance? It is He that dwells in me, Christ Himself. But if you do not believe this, but are desirous of receiving a proof by deeds of Him that dwells in me, you shall know presently; For he is not weak to you-ward, but is even powerful.' And wherefore added he to you-ward, seeing He is mighty everywhere? For should He be minded to punish unbelievers, He is able; or demons, or anything whatsoever. What then is the import of the addition? The expression is either as shaming them exceedingly by remembrance of the proofs they have already received; or else as declaring this, that meanwhile He shows His power in you who ought to be corrected. As he said also in another place, For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? 1 Corinthians 5:12 'For those that are without,' he says, 'He will then call to account in the day of judgment, but you even now, so as to rescue you from that punishment.' But nevertheless even this instance of his solicitude, although arising from tender affection, observe how he combines with fear and much anger, saying, Who to you-ward is not weak, but is powerful in you.

2 Corinthians 13:4

For though He was crucified through weakness, yet He lives through the Power of God.

What is, though He was crucified through weakness? 'For though He chose,' he says, 'to endure a thing which seems to carry a notion of weakness, still this in no way breaks in upon His Power. That still remains invincible, and that thing which seems to be of weakness, has nothing harmed it, nay this very thing itself shows His Power most of all, in that He endured even such a thing, and yet His Power was not mutilated.' Let not then the expression weakness disturb you; for elsewhere also he says, The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men; 1 Corinthians 1:25 although in God is nothing either foolish or weak: but he called the Cross so, as setting forth the conception of the unbelieving regarding it.

Hear him, at least, interpreting himself. For the preaching of the Cross is to them that perish foolishness, but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. 1 Corinthians 1:18 And again; But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (Ib. 23, 24.) And again; But the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit, for they are foolishness unto him. 1 Corinthians 2:14 Observe, how in every place he expresses the conception of the unbelieving, who look upon the Cross as foolishness and weakness.

And so, in truth, here also he means not weakness really such, but what was suspected to be such with the unbelieving. He does not then say this, that because He was weak He was crucified. Away with the thought! For that He had it in His power not to have been crucified He showed throughout; when He now cast men down prostrate, now turned back the beams of the sun, and withered a fig-tree, and blinded their eyes that came against Him, and wrought ten thousand other things. What then is this which he says, through weakness!

That even although He was crucified after enduring peril and treachery, (for we have showed that peril and treachery are called weakness,) yet still He was nothing harmed thereby. And he said this to draw the example unto his own case. For since the Corinthians beheld them persecuted, driven about, despised, and not avenging nor visiting it, in order to teach them that neither do they so suffer from want of power,

nor from being unable to visit it, he leads on the argument up to The Master, because 'He too,' says he, 'was crucified, was bound, suffered ten thousand things, and He visited them not, but continued to endure things which appeared to argue weakness, and in this way displaying His Power, in that although He punishes not nor requites, He is not injured any thing at all.

For instance, the Cross did not cut asunder His life, nor yet impeded His resurrection, but He both rose again and lives.' And when you hear of the Cross and of life, expect to find the doctrine concerning the Incarnation, for all that is said here has reference to that. And if he says though the Power of God, it is not as though He were Himself void of strength to quicken His flesh; but it was indifferent with him to mention either Father or Son. For when he said, the Power of God, he said by His own Power.

For that both He Himself raised it up and sustains it, hear Him saying, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. John 2:19 But if that which is His, this he says to be the Father's, be not disturbed; For, He says, all My Father's things are Mine. John 16:15 And again, All Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine. John 17:10 'As then He that was crucified was nothing harmed,' he says, 'so neither are we when persecuted and warred against;' wherefore also he adds,

For even we also if we are weak in Him, yet we shall live with Him through the Power of God.

What is the meaning of we are weak in Him? We are persecuted, are driven here and there, suffer extremity. But what is with Him? 'Because of the preaching,' he says, 'and our faith in Him. But if for His sake we undergo what is sad and disagreeable, it is quite plain that we shall what is pleasant also:' and so he added, but we are saved with Him by the Power of God.

2 Corinthians 13:5-6

4. Try your own selves, whether ye be in the faith, prove your own selves. Do you not know as to your own selves, that Christ is in you, unless indeed ye be reprobate? But I hope that you shall know that we are not reprobate.

For since by what he has said he has shown that even if he does not punish, it is not because he has not Christ in himself, but because he intimates His long-suffering, Who was crucified and yet avenged not Himself; he again, in another manner, produces the same effect, and still more irrefragably, establishing his argument by the disciples. 'For why speak I of myself,' he says 'the teacher, who have so much care upon me and am entrusted with the whole world and have done such great miracles.

For if you will but examine yourselves who are in the rank of disciples, you will see that Christ is in you also. But if in you, then much more in your teacher. For if you have faith, Christ is in you also.' For they who then believed wrought miracles. Wherefore also he added, Try your own selves, prove your own selves, whether ye be in the faith. Do you not know as to your own selves, unless indeed that Christ is in you, you be reprobate? 'But if in you, much more in your teacher?'

He seems to me here to speak of the faith which relates to miracles. 'For if you have faith,' he says, Christ is in you, unless you have become reprobates. Do you see how again he terrifies them, and shows even to superfluity that Christ is with Him. For he seems to me to be here alluding to them, even as to their lives. For since faith is not enough [by itself] to draw down the energy of the Spirit, and he had said that 'if you are in the faith you have Christ in you,' and it happened that many who had faith were destitute of that energy; in order to solve the difficulty, he says, except ye be reprobate, except [that is] you are corrupt in

life.

But I hope that you shall know that we are not reprobate. What followed naturally was to have said, but if you have become reprobate, yet we have not. He does not, however, say so, for fear of wounding them, but he hints it in an obscure manner, without either making the assertion thus, 'you are reprobate,' or proceeding by question and saying, 'But if you are reprobate,' but leaving out even this way of putting it by question, he indicates it obscurely by adding, But I hope that you shall know that we are not reprobate.

Here also again, great is the threat, great the alarm. 'For since you desire,' he says, 'in this way, by your own punishment to receive the proof, we shall have no difficulty in giving you that demonstration.' But he does not indeed so express himself, but with more weight and threatening. But I hope that you shall know that we are not reprobate. 'For you ought indeed,' he says, 'to have known even without this what we are, and that we have Christ speaking and working in us; but since you desire to receive the proof of it by deeds also, you shall know that we are not reprobate.'

Then when he has held the threat suspended over their heads, and brought the punishment now up to their doors, and has set them a trembling, and made them look for vengeance; see how again he sweetens down his words and soothes their fear, and shows his unambitious temper, his tender solicitude towards his disciples, his high-principledness of purpose, his loftiness and freedom from vain-glory. For he exhibits all these qualities in what he adds, saying,

2 Corinthians 13:7-9

Now I pray to God that you do no evil, not that we may appear approved, but that you may do that which is honorable, though we be as reprobate. For we can do nothing against the truth but for the truth. For we rejoice when we are weak, and you are strong. For this also we pray for even your perfecting.

5. What can be equal to this soul? He was despised, he was spit upon, he was ridiculed, he was mocked, as mean, as contemptible, as a braggart, as boastful in his words but in his deeds unable to make even a little show; and although seeing so great a necessity for showing his own power, he not only puts off, not only shrinks back, but even prays that he may not fall into such a position. For he says, I pray that you do no evil, not that we may appear approved, but that you may do that which is honorable, though we be as reprobate. What is it he says? 'I entreat God. I beseech Him,' he says, 'that I may find no one unreformed, may find no one' that has not repented? Yea, rather, not this alone, but that none may have sinned at all. For,' he says, 'that you have done no [evil], but if you have perchance sinned, then that you may have changed your conduct, and been beforehand with me in reforming, and arresting all wrath. For this is not what I am eager about, that we should be approved in this way, but clean the contrary, that we should not appear approved. For if you should continue,' he says, 'sinning and not repenting, it will be necessary for us to chastise, to punish, to maim your bodies; (as happened in the case of Sapphira and of Magus;) and we have given proof of our power. But we pray not for this, but the contrary, that we may not be shown to be approved in this way, that we may not in this way exhibit the proof of the power which is in us, by chastising you and punishing you as sinning and as incurably diseased, but what? That ye should do that which is honorable, we pray for this, that you should ever live in virtue, ever in amendment; and we should be as reprobate, not displaying our power of punishing.' And he said not, reprobate for he would not be reprobate, even though he did not punish, nay rather for this very reason he would be approved; 'but even if some suspect us,' he says, 'on account of our not displaying our power, to be contemptible and cast away, we care nothing for this. Better we should be so deemed of by those, than display the power which

God has given to us in those stripes, and in that unreformedness of heart.'

For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth. For that he may not seem [merely] to be gratifying them, (for this is what one who was void of vain-glory might do,) but to be doing what the nature of the thing demanded, he added this, for we can do nothing against the truth. 'For if we find you,' he says, 'in good repute, having driven away your sins by repentance and having boldness towards God; we shall not be able thereafter, were we never so willing, to punish you, but should we attempt it even, God will not work with us. For to this end gave He us our power that the judgment we give should be true and righteous, not contrary to the truth.' Do you see how in every way he can, he makes what he says void of offensiveness, and softens the harshness of his menace? Moreover as he has eagerly endeavored this, so is he desirous also to show that his mind was quite joined to them; wherefore also he added, For we rejoice when we are weak and you are strong, and this also we pray for even your perfecting. 'For most certainly,' he says, 'we cannot do any thing against the truth, that is, punish you if you are well pleasing [to God]; besides, because we cannot, we therefore do not wish it, and even desire the contrary. Nay, we are particularly glad of this very thing, when we find you giving us no occasion to show that power of ours for punishment. For even if the doing of such things shows men glorious and approved and strong; still we desire the contrary, that you should be approved and unblamable, and that we should never at any time reap the glory thence arising.' Wherefore he says, For we are glad when we are weak. What is, are weak? 'When we may be thought weak.' Not when we are weak, but when we are thought weak; for they were thought so by their enemies, because they displayed not their power of punishing. 'But still we are glad, when your behavior is of such a sort as to give us no pretence for punishing you. And it is a pleasure to us to be in this way considered weak, so that only ye be blameless;' wherefore he adds, and you are strong, that is, 'are approved, are virtuous. And we do not only wish for this, but we pray for this, that you may be blameless, perfect, and afford us no handle.'

6. This is paternal affection, to prefer the salvation of the disciples before his own good name. This is the part of a soul free from vainglory; this best releases from the bonds of the body and makes one to rise aloft from earth to heaven, the being pure from vain-glory; just as therefore the contrary leads unto many sins. For it is impossible that one who is not pure from vain-glory, should be lofty and great and noble; but he must needs grovel on the ground, and do much damage, while the slave of a polluted mistress, more cruel than any barbarian.

For what can be fiercer than she who, when most courted, is then most savage? Even wild beasts are not this, but are tamed by much attention. But vain-glory is quite the contrary, by being contemned she is made tame, by being honored she is made savage and is armed against her honorer. The Jews honored her and were punished with exceeding severity; the disciples slighted her and were crowned. And why speak I of punishment and crowns? For to this very point of being seen to be glorious, it contributes more than any thing, to spit upon vainglory.

And you shall see even in this world that they who honor it are damaged, while those who slight it are benefited. For the disciples who slighted it, (for there is no obstacle to our using the same example again,) and preferred the things of God, outshine the sun, having gained themselves an immortal memory even after their death; while the Jews who crouched to it have become cityless, heartless, degraded, fugitives, exiles, mean, contemptible. Do thou, therefore, if you desire to receive glory, repel glory; but if you pursue glory, you shall miss glory.

And, if you will, let us also try this doctrine in worldly matters. For whom do we make sport of in our jests? Is it not of those whose minds are set upon it? Certainly then, these men are the most entirely destitute of it, having countless accusers and being slighted by all. And whom do we admire, tell me; is it not those who despise it? Certainly then, these are they that are glorified. For as he is rich, not who is in need of many things, but who is in need of nothing; so he is glorious, not who loves glory, but who despises it; for this glory is but a shadow of glory.

No one having seen a loaf painted, though he should be pressed with hunger ever so much, will attack the picture. Neither then do thou pursue these shadows, for this is a shadow of glory, not glory. And that you may know that this is the manner of it and that it is a shadow, consider this that it must be so, when the thing has a bad name among men, when all consider it a thing to be avoided, they even who desire it; and when he who has it and he covets it are ashamed to be called after it.

'Whence then is this desire,' says one, 'and how is the passion engendered?' By littleness of soul, (for one ought not only to accuse it, but also to correct it,) by an imperfect mind, by a childish judgment. Let us then cease to be children, and let us become men: and let us every where pursue the reality, not the shadows, both in wealth, and in pleasure, and in luxury, and in glory, and in power; and this disease will cease, and many others also. For to pursue shadows is a madman's part.

Wherefore also Paul said, Awake up righteously and sin not. 1 Corinthians 15:34 For there is yet another madness, sorer than that caused by devils, than that from frenzy. For that admits of forgiveness, but this is destitute of excuse, seeing the soul itself is corrupted and its right judgment lost; and that of frenzy indeed is an affection of the body, but this madness has its seat in the artificer mind. As then of fevers those are sorer, yea incurable, which seize upon firm bodies and lurk in the recesses of the nerves and are hidden away in the veins, so truly is this madness also, seeing it lurks in the recesses of the mind itself, perverting and destroying it.

For how is it not clear and evident madness, yea, a distemper sorer than any madness, to despise the things which abide forever, and to cling with great eagerness to those which perish? For, tell me, if one were to chase the wind or try to hold it, should we not say that he was mad? And what? If one should grasp a shadow and neglect the reality; if one should hate his own wife and embrace her shadow; or loathe his son and again love his shadow, would you seek any other clearer sign in proof of madness?

Such are they also who greedily follow the present things. For they are all shadow, yea, whether thou mention glory, or power, or good report, or wealth, or luxury, or any other thing of this life. And therefore truly it is that the prophet said, Surely man walks in a shadow, yea, he disquiets himself in vain; Psalm 39:6 and again, Our days decline like a shadow. Psalm 102:11 And in another place, he calls human things smoke and the flower of grass. But it is not only his good things which are shadow, but his evils also, whether it be death thou mention, or poverty, or disease, or any other thing.

What then are those things which abide, both good and evil? The eternal kingdom and the everlasting hell. For neither shall the worm die, nor shall the fire be quenched: Mark 9:44 and these shall rise again to everlasting life: and these to everlasting punishment. Mark 25:46 That then we may escape the one and enjoy the other, letting go the shadow, let us cling to the real things with all earnestness, for so shall we obtain the kingdom of heaven, which may we all obtain though the grace and love towards men of our Lord Jesus Christ, to Whom be glory and might for ever and ever. Amen.

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