

2 Corinthians 3:1

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's sermon emphasizes the transformative power of the Spirit in believers' lives, contrasting the old covenant with the new and highlighting the importance of living a virtuous life as a testament to Christ's work.

Scripture: Matthew 11:28, John 20:22-23, Romans 6:9, 2 Corinthians 3:2-5, Galatians 6:14, 1 Timothy 6:6

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Christian Living"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of living a life that reflects the teachings of Christ, emphasizing the need to avoid sinful behaviors and cultivate virtues like modesty, contentment, and godliness. He contrasts the characteristics of a living soul, which speaks words of gratitude, selflessness, and faith, with those of a dead soul, which engages in filthy talk, envy, and covetousness. Chrysostom urges the listeners to strive for spiritual growth, to reject immoral behaviors, and to seek the abundant life offered through Christ's grace and love.

Transcript

Are we beginning, again to commend ourselves? Or need we, as do some, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you?

He anticipates and puts himself an objection which others would have urged against him, 'You vaunt yourself;' and this though he had before employed so strong a corrective in the expressions, Who is sufficient for these things? and, of sincerity...speak we. 2 Corinthians 2:16-17 Howbeit he is not satisfied with these. For such is his character. From appearing to say any thing great of himself he is far removed, and avoids it even to great superfluity and excess. And mark, I pray you, by this instance also, the abundance of his wisdom. For a thing of woeful aspect, I mean tribulations, he so much exalted and showed to be bright and lustrous, that out of what he said the present objection rose up against him. And he does so also towards the end. For after having enumerated numberless perils, insults, straits, necessities, and as many such like things as be, he added, We commend not ourselves, but speak as giving you occasion to glory. 2 Corinthians 5:12 And he expresses this again with vehemence in that place, and with more of encouragement. For here the words are those of love, Need we, as do some, epistles of commendation? but there what he says is full of a kind of pride even, necessarily and properly so, of pride, I say, and anger. For we commend not ourselves again, says he, but speak as giving you occasion to glory; 2 Corinthians 5:12 and, Again, think ye that we excuse ourselves unto you? For in the

sight of God speak we in Christ. 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. (ib. 12:19, 20.) For to prevent all appearance of a wish to flatter, as though he desired honor from them, he speaks thus, 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. This however comes after many accusations ; But in the beginning he speaks not so, but more gently. And what is it he says? He spoke of his trials and his perils, and that every where he is conducted as in procession by God in Christ, and that the whole world knows of these triumphs. Since then he has uttered great things of himself, he urges this objection against himself, Are we beginning again to commend ourselves? Now what he says is this: Perchance some one will object, 'What is this, O Paul? Do you say these things of yourself, and exalt yourself?' To do away then with this suspicion, he says, We desire not this, that is, to boast and exalt ourselves; yea, so far are we from needing epistles of commendation to you that you are to us instead of an epistle. For, says he,

2 Corinthians 3:2

You are our epistle.

What means this, you are? 'Did we need to be commended to others, we should have produced you before them instead of an epistle.' And this he said in the former Epistle. For the seal of mine Apostleship are you. 1 Corinthians 9:2 But he does not here say it in this manner, but in irony so as to make his question, Do we need epistles of commendation? more cutting. And in allusion to the false apostles, he added, as do some, [epistles of commendation] to you, or letters of commendation from you to others. Then because what he had said was severe, he softens it by adding, You are our epistle, written in our hearts, known of all,

2 Corinthians 3:3

Being made manifest that you are an epistle of Christ.

Here he testifies not only to their love, but also to their good works: since they are able to show unto all men by their own virtue the high worth of their teacher, for this is the meaning of, You are our epistle.

What letters would have done to commend and gain respect for us, that you do both as seen and heard of; for the virtue of the disciples is wont to adorn and to commend the teacher more than any letter.

Written in our hearts.

That is, which all know; we so bear you about every where and have you in mind. As though he said, You are our commendation to others, for we both have you continually in our heart and proclaim to all your good works. Because then that even to others yourselves are our commendation, we need no epistles from you; but further, because we love you exceedingly, we need no commendation to you. For to those who are strangers one has need of letters, but you are in our mind. Yet he said not merely, you are [in it], but written in [it], that is, you cannot slide out of it. For just as from letters by reading, so from our heart by perceiving, all are acquainted with the love we bear you. If then the object of a letter be to certify, such an one is my friend and let him have free intercourse [with you], your love is sufficient to secure all this. For should we go to you, we have no need of others to commend us, seeing your love anticipates this; and should we go to others, again we need no letters, the same love again sufficing unto us in their stead, for we carry about the epistle in our hearts.

2. Then exalting them still higher, he even calls them the epistle of Christ, saying,

2 Corinthians 3:3. Being made manifest that you are an epistle of Christ.

And having said this, he afterwards hence takes ground and occasion for a discussion on the Law. And there is another aim in his here styling them His epistle. For above as commending him, he called them an epistle; but here an epistle of Christ, as having the Law of God written in them. For what things God wished to declare to all and to you, these are written in your hearts. But it was we who prepared you to receive the writing. For just as Moses hewed the stones and tables, so we, your souls. Whence he says,
Ministered by us.

Yet in this they were on an equality; for the former were written on by God, and these by the Spirit. Where then is the difference?

Written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in tables that are hearts of flesh.

Wide as the difference between the Spirit and ink, and a stony table and a fleshy, so wide is that between these and those; consequently between themselves who ministered, and him who ministered to them. Yet because it was a great thing he had uttered, he therefore quickly checks himself, saying,

2 Corinthians 3:4

And such confidence have we through Christ to Godward,

And again refers all to God: for it is Christ, says he, Who is the Author of these things to us.

2 Corinthians 3:5-6

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to account any thing as from ourselves.

See again, yet another corrective. For he possesses this virtue, humility I mean, in singular perfection. Wherefore whenever he says any thing great of himself, he makes all diligence to soften down extremely and by every means, what he has said. And so he does in this place also, saying, Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to account any thing as from ourselves: that is, I said not, We have confidence, as though part were ours and part God's; but I refer and ascribe the whole to Him.

For our sufficiency is from God; who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant.

What means, made us sufficient? Made us able and fitting. And it is not a little thing to be the bearer to the world of such tables and letters, greater far than the former. Whence also he added,

Not of the letter, but of the spirit. See again another difference. What then? Was not that Law spiritual? How then says he, We know that the Law is spiritual? Romans 7:14 Spiritual indeed, but it bestowed not a spirit. For Moses bare not a spirit, but letters; but we have been entrusted with the giving of a spirit. Whence also in further completion of this [contrast,] he says,

For the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.

Yet these things he says not absolutely ; but in allusion to those who prided themselves upon the things of Judaism. And by letter here he means the Law which punishes them that transgress; but by spirit the grace which through Baptism gives life to them who by sins were made dead. For having mentioned the difference arising from the nature of the tables, he does not dwell upon it, but rapidly passing it by, bestows more labor upon this, which most enabled him to lay hold on his hearer from considerations of what was advantageous and easy; for, says he, it is not laborious, and the gift it offers is greater.

For if when discoursing of Christ, he puts especially forward those things which are of His lovingkindness, more than of our merit, and which are mutually connected, much greater necessity is there for his doing so when treating of the covenant. What then is the meaning of the letter kills? He had said tables of stone and hearts of flesh: so far he seemed to mention no great difference. He added that the former [covenant] was written with letters or ink, but this with the Spirit.

Neither did this rouse them thoroughly, He says at last what is indeed enough to give them wings ; the one kills, the other gives life. And what does this mean? In the Law, he that has sin is punished; here, he that has sins comes and is baptized and is made righteous, and being made righteous, he lives, being delivered from the death of sin. The Law, if it lay hold on a murderer, puts him to death; the Gospel, if it lay hold on a murderer, enlightens, and gives him life. And why do I instance a murderer?

The Law laid hold on one that gathered sticks on a sabbath day, and stoned him. Numbers 15:32-36 This is the meaning of, the letter kills. The Gospel takes hold on thousands of homicides and robbers, and baptizing delivers them from their former vices. This is the meaning of, the Spirit gives life. The former makes its captive dead from being alive, the latter renders the man it has convicted alive from being dead. For, come unto me, you that labor and are heavy laden, Matthew 11:28 and, He said not, 'I will punish you,' but, I will give you rest.

For in Baptism the sins are buried, the former things are blotted out, the man is made alive, the entire grace written upon his heart as it were a table. Consider then how high is the dignity of the Spirit, seeing that His tables are better than those former ones; seeing that even a greater thing is shown forth than the resurrection itself. For indeed, that state of death from which He delivers, is more irremediable than the former one: as much more so, as soul is of more value than the body: and this life is conferred by that, by that which the Spirit gives.

But if It be able to bestow this, much more than that which is less. For, that prophets wrought, but this they could not: for none can remit sins but God only; nor did the prophets bestow that life without the Spirit. But this is not the marvel only, that it gives life, but that it enabled others also to do this. For He says, Receive the Holy Ghost. John 20:22 Wherefore? Because without the Spirit it might not be? [Yes,] but God, as showing that It is of supreme authority, and of that Kingly Essence, and has the same power [with Himself,] says this too. Whence also He adds, Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained. John 20:23

3. Since then It has given us life, let us remain living and not return again to the former deadness: for Christ dies no more; for the death that He died, He died unto sin once: Romans 6:9-10 and He will not have us always saved by grace: for so we shall be empty of all things. Wherefore He will have us contribute something also from ourselves. Let us then contribute, and preserve to the soul its life. And what is life in a soul, learn from the body. For the body too we then affirm to live, when it moves with a healthy kind of motion; but when it lies prostrate and powerless, or its motions are disorderly, though it

retain the semblance of life or motion, such a life is more grievous than any death: and should it utter nothing sane but words of the crazy, and see one object instead of another, such a man again is more pitiable than those who are dead.

So also the soul when it has no healthiness, though it retain a semblance of life, is dead: when it does not see gold as gold but as something great and precious; when it thinks not of the future but crawls upon the ground; when it does one thing in place of another. For whence is it clear that we have a soul? Is it not from its operations? When then it does not perform the things proper to it, is it not dead? When, for instance, it has no care for virtue, but is rapacious and transgresses the law; whence can I tell that you have a soul?

Because you walk? But this belongs to the irrational creatures as well. Because you eat and drink? But this too belongs to wild beasts. Well then, because you stand upright on two feet? This convinces me rather that you are a beast in human form. For when you resemble one in all other respects, but not in its manner of erecting itself, thou dost the more disturb and terrify me; and I the more consider that which I see to be a monster. For did I see a beast speaking with the voice of a man, I should not for that reason say it was a man, but even for that very reason a beast more monstrous than a beast.

Whence then can I learn that you have the soul of a man, when you kick like the ass, when you bear malice like the camel, when you bite like the bear, when you devour like the wolf, when you steal like the fox, when you are wily as the serpent, when you are shameless as the dog? Whence can I learn that you have the soul of a man? Will ye that I show you a dead soul and a living? Let us turn the discourse back to those men of old; and, if you will, let us set before us the rich man [in the story] of Lazarus, and we shall know what is death in a soul; for he had a dead soul, and it is plain from what he did.

For, of the works of the soul he did not one, but ate and drank and lived in pleasure only. Such are even now the unmerciful and cruel, for these too have a dead soul as he had. For all its warmth that flows out of the love of our neighbor has been spent, and it is deader than a lifeless body. But the poor man was not such, but standing on the very summit of heavenly wisdom shone out; and though wrestling with continual hunger, and not even supplied with the food that was necessary, neither so spoke he anything of blasphemy against God, but endured all nobly.

Now this is no trifling work of the soul; but a very high proof that it is well-strung and healthful. And when there are not these qualities, it is plainly because the soul is dead that they have perished. Or, tell me, shall we not pronounce that soul dead which the Devil falls upon, striking, biting, spurning it, yet has it no sense of any of these things, but lies deadened nor grieves when being robbed of its wealth; but he even leaps upon it, yet it remains unmoved, like a body when the soul is departed, nor even feels it?

For when the fear of God is not present with strictness, such must the soul needs be, and then the dead more miserable. For the soul is not dissolved into corruption and ashes and dust, but into things of fouler odor than these, into drunkenness and anger and covetousness, into improper loves and unseasonable desires. But if you would know more exactly how foul an odor it has, give me a soul that is pure, and then you will see clearly how foul the odor of this filthy and impure one.

For at present you will not be able to perceive it. For so long as we are in contact habitually with a foul odor, we are not sensible of it. But when we are fed with spiritual words, then shall we be cognizant of that evil. And yet to many this seems of no importance. And I say nothing as yet of hell; but let us, if you will, examine what is present, and how worthy of derision is he, not that practises, but that utters filthiness; how

first he loads himself with contumely; just as one that sputters any filth from the mouth, so he defiles himself.

For if the stream is so impure, think what must be the fountain of this filth! for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. Matthew 12:34 Yet not for this alone do I grieve, but because that to some this does not even seem to be reckoned among improper things. Hence the evils are all made worse, when we both sin, and do not think we even do amiss.

4. Will you then learn how great an evil is filthy talking? See how the hearers blush at your indecency. For what is viler than a filthy talker? What more infamous? For such thrust themselves into the rank of buffoons and of prostituted women, yea rather these have more shame than you. How can you teach a wife to be modest when by such language you are training her to proceed unto lasciviousness? Better vent rottenness from the mouth than a filthy word. Now if your mouth have an ill-odor, you partake not even of the common meats; when then you had so foul a stink in your soul, tell me, do you dare to partake of mysteries?

Did any one take a dirty vessel and set it upon the table, you would have beaten him with clubs and driven him out: yet God at His own table, (for His table our mouth is when filled with thanksgiving,) when you pour out words more disgusting than any unclean vessel, tell me, do you think that you provoke not? And how is this possible? For nothing does so exasperate the holy and pure as do such words; nothing makes men so impudent [ἀνομιῶν, ἠὲ ἄνομιῶν ἀνομιῶν] and shameless as to say and listen to such; nothing does so unstring the sinews of modesty as the flame which these kindle.

God has set perfumes in your mouth, but you store up words of fouler odor than a corpse, and destroy the soul itself and make it incapable of motion. For when you insult, this is not the voice of the soul, but of anger; when you talk filthily, it is lewdness, and not she that spoke; when you detract, it is envy; when you scheme, covetousness. These are not her works, but those of the affections and the diseases belonging to her. As then corruption comes not simply of the body, but of the death and the passion which is thus in the body; so also, in truth, these things come of the passions which grow upon the soul.

For if you will hear a voice from a living soul, hear Paul saying, Having food and covering, we shall be therewith content: 1 Timothy 6:8 and Godliness is great gain: 1 Timothy 6:6 and, The world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world. Galatians 6:14 Hear Peter saying, Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have, give I you. Acts 3:6 Hear Job giving thanks and saying, The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Job 1:21 These things are the words of a living soul, of a soul discharging the functions proper to it.

Thus also Jacob said, If the Lord will give me bread to eat and raiment to put on. Genesis 28:20 Thus also Joseph, How shall I do this wickedness, and sin before God? Genesis 39:9 But not so that barbarian woman; but as one drunken and insane [ἠέθλητο καὶ ἠέθλητο... ἠέθλητο], so spoke she, saying, Lie with me. Genesis 39:7 These things then knowing, let us earnestly covet the living soul, let us flee the dead one, that we may also obtain the life to come; of which may all we be made partakers, through the grace and love toward men of our Lord Jesus Christ, though Whom and with Whom, to the Father, together with the Holy Ghost, be glory, might, honor, now and for ever, and world without end. Amen.

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net