

Colossians 1:15-18

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the dignity and preeminence of the Son, who is the Image of the Invisible God, the Firstborn of all creation, and the Head of the body, the Church.

Scripture: Matthew 18:10, Matthew 23:3, John 14:27, Acts 23:5, 1 Corinthians 3:10, 2 Corinthians 5:18, Ephesians 2:14, Colossians 1:15, Hebrews 2:17

Topics: "Christology", "Reconciliation"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the exalted nature of Jesus Christ as the Image of the invisible God and the Firstborn of all creation. He emphasizes that Jesus, as God's Son, is the exact likeness of God and superior to all, including Angels. Chrysostom explains that Jesus, as the Firstborn from the dead, is the Firstfruits of the Resurrection, reconciling all things to Himself through His sacrifice on the Cross. He highlights the importance of peace, unity, and reconciliation among believers, pointing out that Christ's work brought harmony between heaven and earth, even reconciling Angels and humans.

Transcript

Who is the Image of the invisible God, the Firstborn of all creation: for in Him were all things created, in the heavens, and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers: all things have been created through Him, and unto Him; and He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the Church.

Today it is necessary for me to pay the debt, which yesterday I deferred, in order that I might address it to your minds when in full force. Paul, discoursing as we showed of the dignity of the Son, says these words: Who is the Image of the invisible God. Whose image then will you have Him be? God's? Then he is exactly like the one to whom you assign Him. For if as a man's image, say so, and I will have done with you as a madman. But if as God and God's Son, God's image, he shows the exact likeness. Wherefore has no Angel anywhere been called either image or son, but man both? Wherefore? Because in the former case indeed the exaltedness of their nature might presently have thrust the many into this impiety ; but in the other case the mean and low nature is a pledge of security against this, and will not allow any, even should they desire it, to suspect anything of the kind, nor to bring down the Word so low. For this cause, where the meanness is great, the Scripture boldly asserts the honor, but where the nature is higher, it forbears. The Image of the Invisible is itself also invisible, and invisible in like manner, for otherwise it would not be an image. For an image, so far as it is an image, even among us, ought to be

exactly similar, as, for example, in respect of the features and the likeness. But here indeed among us, this is by no means possible; for human art fails in many respects, or rather fails in all, if you examine with accuracy. But where God is, there is no error, no failure.

But if a creature: how is He the Image of the Creator? For neither is a horse the image of a man. If the Image mean not exact likeness to the Invisible, what hinders the Angels also from being His Image? For they too are invisible; but not to one another: but the soul is invisible: but because it is invisible, it is simply on that account an image, and not in such sort as he and angels are images.

The Firstborn of all creation. What then, says one, Lo, He is a creature. Whence? Tell me. Because he said 'Firstborn.' However, he said not first created, but firstborn. Then it is reasonable that he should be called many things. For he must also be called a brother in all things. Hebrews 2:17 And we must take from Him His being Creator; and insist that neither in dignity nor in any other thing is He superior to us? And who that has understanding would say this? For the word firstborn is not expressive of dignity and honor, nor of anything else, but of time only.

What does the firstborn signify? That he is created, is the answer. Well. If then this be so, it has also kindred expressions. But otherwise the firstborn is of the same essence with those of whom he is firstborn. Therefore he will be the firstborn son of all things -- for it said of every creature; therefore of stones also, and of me, is God the Word firstborn. But again, of what, tell me, are the words firstborn from the dead Colossians 1:18; Romans 8:29 declaratory? Not that He first rose; for he said not simply, of the dead, but firstborn from the dead, nor yet, that He died first, but that He rose the firstborn from the dead.

So that they declare nothing else than this, that He is the Firstfruits of the Resurrection. Surely then neither in the place before us. Next he proceeds to the doctrine itself. For that they may not think Him to be of more recent existence, because that in former times the approach was through Angels, but now through Him; he shows first, that they had no power (for else it had not been out of darkness ver. 13 that he brought), next, that He is also before them. And he uses as a proof of His being before them, this; that they were created by him.

For in Him, he says, were all things created. What say here the followers of Paul of Samosata? The things in the heavens. What was in question, he has placed first; and the things upon the earth. Then he says, the visible and the invisible things; invisible, such as soul, and all that has come to exist in heaven; visible, such as men, sun, sky. Whether thrones. And what is granted, he lets alone, but what is doubted he asserts. Whether thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers.

The words whether, or, comprehend the whole of things; but by means of the greater things show it of the less also. But the Spirit is not among the powers. All things, he says, have been created through Him, and unto Him. Lo, in Him, is through Him, for having said in Him, he added, through Him. But what unto Him? It is this; the subsistence of all things depends on Him. Not only did He Himself bring them out of nothing into being, but Himself sustains them now, so that were they dissevered from His Providence, they were at once undone and destroyed.

But He said not, He continues them, which had been a grosser way of speaking, but what is more subtle, that on Him they depend. To have only a bearing on Him is enough to continue anything and bind it fast. So also the word firstborn, in the sense of a foundation. But this does not show the creatures to be consubstantial with Him; but that all things are through Him, and in Him are upheld. Since Paul also when he says elsewhere, I have laid a foundation 1 Corinthians 3:10, is speaking not concerning substance, but

operation.

For, that you may not think Him to be a minister, he says that He continues them, which is not less than making them. Certainly, with us it is greater even: for to the former, art conducts us; but to the latter, not so, it does not even stay a thing in decay.

And He is before all things, he says. This is befitting God. Where is Paul of Samosata? And in Him all things consist, that is, they are created into Him. He repeats these expressions in close sequence; with their close succession, as it were with rapid strokes, tearing up the deadly doctrine by the roots. For, if even when such great things had been declared, still after so long a time Paul of Samosata sprung up, how much more [would such have been the case], had not these things been said before? And in Him, he says, all things consist. How consist in one who was not? So that the things also done through Angels are of Him.

And He is the head of the body, the Church.

Then having spoken of His dignity, he afterwards speaks of His love to man also. He is, says he, the Head of the body, the Church. And he said not of the fullness, (although this too is signified,) out of a wish to show His great friendliness to us, in that He who is thus above, and above all, connected Himself with those below. For everywhere He is first; above first; in the Church first, for He is the Head; in the Resurrection first. That is,

Ver. 18. That He might have the preëminence. So that in generation also He is first. And this is what Paul is chiefly endeavoring to show. For if this be made good, that He was before all the Angels; then there is brought in along with it this also as a consequence, that He did their works by commanding them. And what is indeed wonderful, he makes a point to show that He is first in the later generation. Although elsewhere he calls Adam first 1 Corinthians 15:45, as in truth he is; but here he takes the Church for the whole race of mankind. For He is first of the Church; and first of men after the flesh, like as of the Creation. And therefore he here uses the word firstborn.

What is in this place the meaning of the Firstborn? Who was created first, or rose before all; as in the former place it means, Who was before all things. And here indeed he uses the word firstfruits, saying, Who is the Firstfruits, the Firstborn from the dead, that in all things He might have the preëminence, showing that the rest also are such as He; but in the former place it is not the Firstfruits of creation. And it is there, The Image of the invisible God, and then, Firstborn.

Ver. 19, 20. For it was the good pleasure of the Father, that in Him should all the fullness dwell. And having made peace through the Blood of His Cross, through Him to reconcile all things unto Himself, whether things upon the earth, or things in the heavens.

Whatsoever things are of the Father, these he says are of the Son also, and that with more of intensity, because that He both became dead for, and united Himself to us. He said, Firstfruits, as of fruits. He said not Resurrection, but Firstfruits, showing that He has sanctified us all, and offered us, as it were, a sacrifice. The term fullness some use of the Godhead, like as John said, Of His fullness have all we received. That is, whatever was the Son, the whole Son dwelt there, not a sort of energy, but a Substance.

He has no cause to assign but the will of God: for this is the import of, it was the good pleasure...in Him. And...through Him to reconcile all things unto Himself. Lest you should think that He undertook the office

of a minister only, he says, unto Himself. 2 Corinthians 5:18 And yet he elsewhere says, that He reconciled us to God, as in the Epistle he wrote to the Corinthians. And he well said, Through Him to make an end of reconciling; for they were already reconciled; but completely, he says, and in such sort, as no more to be at enmity with Him. How? For not only the reconciliation was set forth, but also the manner of the reconciliation. Having made peace through the Blood of His Cross. The word reconcile, shows the enmity; the words having made peace, the war. Through the Blood of His Cross, through Himself, whether things upon the earth, or things in the heavens. A great thing indeed it is to reconcile; but that this should be through Himself too, is a greater thing; and a greater still -- how through Himself? Through His Blood. Through His Blood; and he said not simply His Blood, but what is yet greater, through the Cross. So that the marvels are five: He reconciled us; to God; through Himself; through Death; through the Cross. Admirable again! How he has mixed them up! For lest you should think that it is one thing merely, or that the Cross is anything of itself, he says through Himself. How well he knows that this was a great thing. Because not by speaking words, but by giving Himself up for the reconciliation, He so wrought everything.

But what is things in the heavens? For with reason indeed is it said, the things upon the earth, for those were filled with enmity, and manifoldly divided, and each one of us was utterly at variance with himself, and with the many; but how made He peace among the things in the heavens? Was war and battle there also? How then do we pray, saying, Your will be done, as in heaven, so on earth? Matthew 6:10 What is it then? The earth was divided from heaven, the Angels had become enemies to men, through seeing the Lord insulted. To sum up, he says, all things in Christ, the things in the heavens, and the things upon the earth. Ephesians 1:10 How? The things in heaven indeed in this way: He translated Man there, He brought up to them the enemy, the hated one. Not only made He the things on earth to be at peace, but He brought up to them him that was their enemy and foe. Here was peace profound. Angels again appeared on the earth thereafter, because that Man too had appeared in heaven. And it seems to me that Paul was caught up on this account 2 Corinthians 12:2, and to show that the Son also had been received up there. For in the earth indeed, the peace was twofold; with the things of heaven, and with themselves; but in heaven it was simple. For if the Angels rejoice over one sinner that repents, much more will they over so many.

All this God's power has wrought. Why then place ye confidence in Angels? says he. For so far are they from bringing you near, that they were ever your enemies, except God Himself had reconciled you with them. Why then run ye to them? Would you know the hatred which the Angels had against us, how great it was; and how averse to us they always were? They were sent to take vengeance in the cases of the Israelites, of David, of the Sodomites, of the Valley of weeping. Exodus 23:20 Not so however now, but, on the contrary, they sang upon the earth 2 Samuel 24:16 with exceeding joy. And He led these down to men Genesis 19:13, and led men up to them.

And observe, I pray you, the marvel in this: He brought these first down hither, and then he took up man to them; earth became heaven, because that heaven was about to receive the things of earth. Therefore when we give thanks, we say, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to men. Behold, he says, even men appeared well-pleasing to Him thereafter. What is good will? Ephesians 2:14; Deuteronomy 32:8, Septuagint Reconciliation. No longer is the heaven a wall of partition. At first the Angels were according to the number of the nations; but now, not to the number of the nations, but that of the believers. Whence is this evident? Hear Christ saying, See that you despise not one of these little ones, for their Angels do always behold the face of My Father which is in heaven. Matthew 18:10 For each believer has an Angel; since even from the beginning, every one of those that were approved had his

Angel, as Jacob says, The Angel that feeds me, and delivers me from my youth. Genesis 48:15-16, nearly If then we have Angels, let us be sober, as though we were in the presence of tutors; for there is a demon present also. Therefore we pray, asking for the Angel of peace, and everywhere we ask for peace (for there is nothing equal to this); peace, in the Churches, in the prayers, in the supplications, in the salutations; and once, and twice, and thrice, and many times, does he that is over the Church give it, Peace be unto you. Wherefore? Because this is the Mother of all good things; this is the foundation of joy. Therefore Christ also commanded the Apostles on entering into the houses straightway to say this, as being a sort of symbol of the good things; for He says, When ye come into the houses, say, Peace be unto you; for where this is wanting, everything is useless. And to His disciples Christ said, Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you. John 14:27 This prepares the way for love. And he that is over the Church, says not, Peace be unto you, simply, but Peace be unto all. For what if with this man we have peace, but with another, war and fighting? What is the gain? For neither in the body, should some of its elements be at rest and others in a state of variance, is it possible that health should ever be upheld; but only when the whole of them are in good order, and harmony, and peace, and except the whole are at rest, and continue within their proper limits, all will be overturned. And, further, in our minds, except all our thoughts are at rest, peace will not exist. So great a good is peace, as that the makers and producers of it are called the sons of God Matthew 5:9-45, with reason; because the Son of God for this cause came upon the earth, to set at peace the things in the earth, and those in the heavens. But if the peacemakers are the sons of God, the makers of disturbance are sons of the devil.

What do you say? Do you excite contentions and fightings? And does any ask who is so unhappy? Many there are who rejoice at evil, and who do rather rend in pieces the Body of Christ, than did the soldiers pierce it with the spear, or the Jews who struck it through with the nails. A less evil was that than this; those Members, so cut through, again united, but these when torn off, if they be not united here, will never be united, but remain apart from the Fullness. When you are minded to war against your brother, bethink you that you war against the members of Christ, and cease from your madness. For what if he be an outcast? What if he be vile? What if he be open to contempt? So says He, It is not the will of My Father that one of these little ones should perish. Matthew 18:14 And again, Their Angels do always behold the face of My Father which is in heaven. Matthew 18:10 God for his sake and yours even became a servant, and was slain; and do you consider him to be nothing? Surely in this respect also you fight against God, in that you deliver a judgment contrary to His. When he that is over the Church comes in, he straightway says, Peace unto all; when he preaches, Peace unto all; when he blesses, Peace unto all; when he bids to salute, Peace unto all; when the Sacrifice is finished, Peace unto all: and again, in the middle, Grace to you and peace. How then is it not monstrous, if, while hearing so many times that we are to have peace, we are in a state of feud with each other; and receiving peace, and giving it back, are at war with him that gives it to us? You say, And to your spirit. And do you traduce him abroad? Woe is me! That the majestic usages of the Church have become forms of things merely, not a truth. Woe is me! That the watchwords of this army proceed no farther than to be only words. Whence also you are ignorant wherefore is said, Peace unto all. But hear what follows, what Christ says; And into whatsoever city or village you shall enter...as you enter into the house, salute it; and if the house be worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it be not worthy, let your peace return to you. Matthew 10:11-13 We are therefore ignorant; because we look upon this merely as a figure of words; and we assent not to them in our minds. For do I give the Peace? It is Christ who deigns to speak by us. Even if at all other times we are void of grace, yet are we not now, for your sakes. For if the Grace of God wrought in an ass and a diviner, for the sake of an economy, and the advantage of the Israelites Numbers 22, it is quite clear that it will not refuse to operate even in us, but for your sakes will endure even this.

Let none say then that I am mean, and low, and worthy of no consideration, and in such a frame of mind attend to me. For such I am; but God's way always is, to be present even with such for the sake of the many. And, that you may know this, with Cain He vouchsafed to talk for Abel's sake Genesis 4, with the devil for Job's Job 1, with Pharaoh for Joseph's Genesis 41, with Nebuchadnezzar for Daniel's Daniel 2 and Daniel 4, with Belshazzar, for the same Daniel 5. And Magi moreover obtained a revelation Matthew 2; and Caiaphas prophesied, though a slayer of Christ, and an unworthy man, because of the worthiness of the priesthood. John 11:49 And it is said to have been for this reason that Aaron was not smitten with leprosy. For why, tell me, when both had spoken against Moses did she alone suffer the punishment? Numbers 12 Marvel not: for if in worldly dignities, even though ten thousand charges be laid against a man, yet is he not brought to trial before he has laid down his office, in order that it may not be dishonored along with him; much more in the case of spiritual office, be he whosoever he may, the grace of God works in him, for otherwise everything is lost: but when he has laid it down, either after he is departed or even here, then indeed, then he will suffer a sorer punishment.

Do not, I pray you, think that these things are spoken from us; it is the Grace of God which works in the unworthy, not for our sakes, but for yours. Hear ye then what Christ says. If the house be worthy, let your peace come upon it. Matthew 10:13-15 And how becomes it worthy? If they receive you Luke 10:8, He says. But if they receive you not, nor hear your words,...verily I say unto you, it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrhah in the day of judgment, than for that city. What boots it then, that you receive us, and hear not the things we say? What gain is it that you wait upon us, and give no heed to the things which are spoken to you? This will be honor to us, this the admirable service, which is profitable both to you and to us, if you hear us. Hear also Paul saying, I knew not, brethren, that he was High Priest. Acts 23:5 Hear also Christ saying, All whatsoever they bid you observe Matthew 23:3, that observe and do. Thou despisest not me, but the Priesthood; when you see me stripped of this, then despise me; then no more will I endure to impose commands. But so long as we sit upon this throne, so long as we have the first place, we have both the dignity and the power, even though we are unworthy. If the throne of Moses was of such reverence, that for its sake they were to be heard, much more the throne of Christ. It, we have received by succession; from it we speak; since the time that Christ has vested in us the ministry of reconciliation.

Ambassadors, whatever be their sort, because of the dignity of an embassy, enjoy much honor. For observe; they go alone into the heart of the land of barbarians, through the midst of so many enemies; and because the law of embassy is of mighty power, all honor them; all look towards them with respect, all send them forth with safety. And we now have received a word of embassy, and we have come from God, for this is the dignity of the Episcopate. We have come to you on an embassy, requesting you to put an end to the war, and we say on what terms; not promising to give cities, nor so and so many measures of grain, nor slaves, nor gold; but the kingdom of heaven, eternal life, society with Christ, the other good things, which neither are we able to tell you, so long as we are in this flesh, and the present life. Ambassadors then we are, and we wish to enjoy honor, not for our own sakes, far be it, for we know its worthlessness, but for yours; that you may hear with earnestness the things we say; that you may be profited, that not with listlessness or indifference ye may attend to what is spoken. See ye not ambassadors, how all pay court to them? We are God's ambassadors to men; but, if this offend you, not we, but the Episcopate itself, not this man or that, but the Bishop. Let no one hear me, but the dignity. Let us then do everything according to the will of God, that we may live to the glory of God, and be counted worthy of the good things promised to those that love Him, through the grace and lovingkindness, etc. etc.

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