

# Colossians 2:16-19

by St. John Chrysostom

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*St. John Chrysostom's sermon on Colossians 2:16-19 emphasizes the importance of holding fast to Christ and rejecting human traditions that distract from true faith.*

**Scripture:** John 6:67, 1 Corinthians 11:21, 1 Corinthians 15:47, 2 Corinthians 13:2, Galatians 5:3, Ephesians 2:4, Colossians 2:16, 1 Peter 2:21

**Topics:** "False Humility", "Worldly Pride"

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## Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the dangers of being judged by man-made traditions and the pursuit of worldly honors and wealth, emphasizing the importance of focusing on Christ as the true source of life and glory. He warns against being misled by persuasive speech and false humility that lead to worshiping angels and indulging in vain philosophies. Chrysostom urges believers to seek heavenly things, not earthly pleasures, and to avoid being entangled in excessive pride, luxury, and senselessness that dishonor the soul and distract from true faith and devotion to God.

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## Transcript

Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a feast day, or a new moon, or a sabbath day: which are a shadow of the things to come; but the body is Christ's. Let no man rob you of your prize by a voluntary humility and worshiping of the Angels, dwelling in the things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast the Head, from whom all the body being supplied and knit together, through the joints and bands, increases with the increase of God.

Having first said darkly, Take heed lest there shall be any one that makes spoil of you after the tradition of men Colossians 2:8; and again, further back, This, I say, that no one may delude you with persuasiveness of speech Colossians 2:4; thus preoccupying their soul, and working in it anxious thoughts; next, having inserted those benefits, and increased this effect, he then brings in his reproof last, and says, Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a feast day, or a new moon, or a sabbath day.

Do you see how he depreciates them? If you have obtained such things, he says, why make yourselves accountable for these petty matters? And he makes light of them, saying, or in the part of a feast day, for in truth they did not retain the whole of the former rule, or a new moon, or a sabbath day. He said not, Do not then observe them, but, let no man judge you. He showed that they were transgressing, and undoing, but he brought his charge against others. Endure not those that judge you, he says, nay, not so much as this either, but he argues with those persons, almost stopping their mouths, and saying, You ought not to

judge.

But he would not have reflected on these. He said not in clean and unclean, nor yet in feasts of Tabernacles, and unleavened bread, and Pentecost, but in part of a feast: for they ventured not to keep the whole; and if they did observe it, yet not so as to celebrate the feast. In part, he says, showing that the greater part is done away. For even if they did keep sabbath, they did not do so with precision. Which are a shadow of the things to come; he means, of the New Covenant; but the body is Christ's.

Some persons here punctuate thus, but the body is of Christ, i.e. the truth has come in with Christ: others thus; The Body of Christ let no man adjudge away from you, that is, thwart you of it. The term καταβραβεύθηναι, is employed when the victory is with one party, and the prize with another, when though a victor you are thwarted. You stand above the devil and sin; why do you again subject yourself to sin? Therefore he said that he is a debtor to fulfill the whole law Galatians 5:3; and again, Is Christ found to be the minister of sin Galatians 2:17?

Which he said when writing to the Galatians. When he had filled them with anger through saying, adjudge away from you, then he begins; being a voluntary, he says, in humility and worshiping of Angels, intruding into things he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind. How in humility, or how puffed up? He shows that the whole arose out of vainglory. But what is on the whole the drift of what is said? There are some who maintain that we must be brought near by Angels, not by Christ, that were too great a thing for us.

Therefore it is that he turns over and over again what has been done by Christ, through the Blood of His Cross Colossians 1:20; on this account he says that He suffered for us; that He loved us. 1 Peter 2:21 And besides in this very same thing, moreover, they were elevated afresh. And he said not introduction by, but worshiping of Angels. Intruding into things he has not seen. Ephesians 2:4 For he has not seen Angels, and yet is affected as though he had. Therefore he says, Puffed up by his fleshly mind vainly, not about any true fact.

About this doctrine, he is puffed up, and puts forward a show of humility. By his carnal mind, not spiritual; his reasoning is of man. And not holding fast the Head, he says, from whom all the body. All the body thence has its being, and its well-being. Why, letting go the Head, do you cling to the members? If you are fallen off from it, you are lost. From whom all the body. Every one, be he who he may, thence has not life only, but also even connection. All the Church, so long as she holds The Head, increases; because here is no more passion of pride and vainglory, nor invention of human fancy.

Mark that from whom, meaning the Son. Through the joints and bands, he says, being supplied, and knit together, increases with the increase of God; he means, that which is according to God, that of the best life.

Ver. 20. If you died with Christ.

He puts that in the middle, and on either side, expressions of greater vehemence. If you died with Christ from the elements of the world, he says, why as though living in the world do ye subject yourselves to ordinances? This is not the consequence, for what ought to have been said is, how as though living are you subject to those elements? But letting this pass, what says he?

Ver. 21, 22. Handle not, nor taste, nor touch; all which things are to perish with the using; after the precepts and doctrines of men.

You are not in the world, he says, how is it you are subject to its elements? How to its observances? And mark how he makes sport of them, touch not, handle not, taste not, as though they were cowards and keeping themselves clear of some great matters, all which things are to perish with the using. He has taken down the swollenness of the many, and added, after the precepts and doctrines of men. What do you say? Do you speak even of the Law? Henceforth it is but a doctrine of men, after the time has come. Or, because they adulterated it, or else, he alludes to the Gentile institutions. The doctrine, he says, is altogether of man.

Ver. 23. Which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and severity to the body; but are not of any value against the indulgence of the flesh.

Show, he says; not power, not truth. So that even though they have a show of wisdom, let us turn away from them. For he may seem to be a religious person, and modest, and to have a contempt for the body.

Not of any value against the indulgence of the flesh. For God has given it honor, but they use it not with honor. Thus, when it is a doctrine, he knows how to call it honor. They dishonor the flesh, he says, depriving it, and stripping it of its liberty, not giving leave to rule it with its will. God has honored the flesh.

Chap. iii. ver. 1. If then you were raised together with Christ.

He brings them together, having above established that He died. Therefore he says, If then you were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above. No observances are there. Where Christ is seated on the right hand of God. Wonderful! Whither has he led our minds aloft! How has he filled them with mighty aspiration! It was not enough to say, the things that are above, nor yet, where Christ is, but what? seated on the right hand of God. From that point he was preparing them henceforward to see the earth.

Ver. 2, 3, 4. Set your mind on the things that are above, not on the things that are upon the earth. For you died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life shall be manifested, then shall you also with Him be manifested in glory.

This is not your life, he says, it is some other one. He is now urgent to remove them, and insists upon showing that they are seated above, and are dead; from both considerations establishing the position, that they are not to seek the things which are here. For whether ye be dead, you ought not to seek them; or Whether ye be above, you ought not to seek them. Does Christ appear? Neither does your life. It is in God, above. What then? When shall we live? When Christ shall be manifested, who is your life; then seek ye glory, then life, then enjoyment.

This is to prepare the way for drawing them off from pleasure and ease. Such is his wont: when establishing one position, he darts off to another; as, for instance, when discoursing of those who at supper were beforehand with one another, he all at once falls upon the observance of the Mysteries. For he has a great rebuke when it is administered unsuspected. It is hid, he says, from you. Then shall you also with Him be manifested. So that, now, you do not appear. See how he has removed them into the very heaven. For, as I said, he is always bent upon showing that they have the very same things which Christ has; and through all his Epistles, the tenor is this, to show that in all things they are partakers with

Him. Therefore he uses the terms, Head, and Body, and does everything to convey this to them.

If therefore we shall then be manifested, let us not grieve, when we enjoy not honor: if this life be not life, but it be hidden, we ought to live this life as though dead. Then shall you also, he says, with Him be manifested in glory. In glory, he said, not merely manifested. For the pearl too is hidden so long as it is within the oyster. If then we be treated with insult, let us not grieve; or whatever it be we suffer; for this life is not our life, we are strangers and sojourners. For you died, he says. Who is so witless, as for a corpse, dead and buried, either to buy servants, or build houses, or prepare costly raiment? None. Neither then do ye; but as we seek one thing only, namely, that we be not in a naked state, so here too let us seek one thing and no more. Our first man is buried: buried not in earth, but in water; not death-destroyed, but buried by death's destroyer, not by the law of nature, but by the governing command that is stronger than nature. For what has been done by nature, may perchance be undone; but what has been done by His command, never. Nothing is more blessed than this burial, whereat all are rejoicing, both Angels, and men, and the Lord of Angels. At this burial, no need is there of vestments, nor of coffin, nor of anything else of that kind. Would you see the symbol of this? I will show you a pool wherein the one was buried, the other raised; in the Red Sea the Egyptians were sunk beneath it, but the Israelites went up from out of it; in the same act he buries the one, generates the other.

Marvel not that generation and destruction take place in Baptism; for, tell me, dissolving and cementing, are they not opposite? It is evident to all. Such is the effect of fire; for fire dissolves and destroys wax, but it cements together metallic earth, and works it into gold. So in truth here also, the force of the fire, having obliterated the statue of wax, has displayed a golden one in its stead; for in truth before the Bath we were of clay, but after it of gold. Whence is this evident? Hear him saying, The first man is of the earth, earthy, the second man is the Lord from heaven. 1 Corinthians 15:47 I spoke of a difference as great as that between clay and gold; but greater still do I find the difference between heavenly and earthy; not so widely do clay and gold differ, as do things earthy and heavenly. Waxen we were, and clay-formed. For the flame of lust did much more melt us, than fire does wax, and any chance temptation did far rather shatter us than a stone does things of clay. And, if you will, let us give an outline of the former life, and see whether all was not earth and water, and full of fluctuation and dust, and instability, and flowing away.

And if you will, let us scrutinize not the former things, but the present, and see whether we shall not find everything that is, mere dust and water. For what will you tell me of? Authority and power? For nothing in this present life is thought to be more enviable than these. But sooner may one find the dust when on the air stationary, than these things; especially now. For to whom are they not under subjection? To those who are lovers of them; to eunuchs; to those who will do anything for the sake of money; to the passions of the populace; to the wrath of the more powerful. He who was yesterday up high on his tribunal, who had his heralds shouting with thrilling voice, and many to run before, and haughtily clear the way for him through the forum, is today mean and low, and of all those things bereft and bare, like dust blast-driven, like a stream that has passed by. And like as the dust is raised by our feet, so truly are magistracies also produced by those who are engaged about money, and in the whole of life have the rank and condition of feet; and like as the dust when it is raised occupies a large portion of the air, though itself be but a small body, so too does power; and like as the dust blinds the eyes, so too does the pride of power bedim the eyes of the understanding.

But what? Will you that we examine that object of many prayers, wealth? Come, let us examine it in its several parts. It has luxury, it has honors, it has power. First then, if you will, let us examine luxury. Is it not dust? Yea, rather, it goes by swifter than dust, for the pleasure of luxurious living reaches only to the

tongue, and when the belly is filled, not to the tongue even. But, says one, honors are of themselves pleasant things. Yet what can be less pleasant than that same honor, when it is rendered with a view to money? When it is not from free choice and with a readiness of mind, it is not thou that reapest the honor, but your wealth. So that this very thing makes the man of wealth, most of all men, dishonored. For, tell me; suppose all men honored you, who had a friend; the while confessing that thou, to be sure, were good for nothing, but that they were compelled to honor you on his account; could they possibly in any other way have so dishonored you? So that our wealth is the cause of dishonor to us, seeing it is more honored than are its very possessors, and a proof rather of weakness than of power. How then is it not absurd that we are not counted of as much value as earth and ashes, (for such is gold,) but that we are honored for its sake? With reason. But not so he that despises wealth; for it were better not to be honored at all, than so honored. For tell me, were one to say to you, I think you worthy of no honor at all, but for your servants' sakes I honor you, could now anything be worse than this dishonor? But if to be honored for the sake of servants, who are partakers of the same soul and nature with ourselves, be a disgrace, much more then is it such, to be honored for the sake of meaner things, such as the walls and courts of houses, and vessels of gold, and garments. A scorn indeed were this, and shame; better die than be so honored. For, tell me, if you were in peril in this your pride, and some low and disgusting person were to be willing to extricate you from your peril, what could be worse than this? What ye say one to another about the city, I wish to say to you. Once on a time our city gave offense to the Emperor, and he gave orders that the whole of it should utterly be destroyed, men, children, houses, and all. (For such is the wrath of kings, they indulge their power as much as ever they choose, so great an evil is power.) It was then in the extremest of perils. The neighboring city, however, this one on the sea-coast, went and besought the king in our behalf: upon which the inhabitants of our city said that this was worse than if the city had been razed to the ground. So, to be thus honored is worse than being dishonored. For see whence honor has its root. The hands of cooks procure us to be honored, so that to them we ought to feel gratitude; and swineherds supplying us with a rich table, and weavers, and spinners, and workers in metal, and confectioners, and table furnishers.

Were it not then better not to be honored at all, than to be beholden to these for the honor? And besides this, moreover, I will endeavor to prove clearly that opulence is a condition full of dishonor; it embases the soul; and what is more dishonorable than this? For tell me, suppose one had a comely person, and passing all in beauty, and wealth were to go to him and promise to make it ugly, and instead of healthy, diseased, instead of cool, inflamed; and having filled every limb with dropsy, were to make the countenance bloated, and distend it all over; and were to swell out the feet, and make them heavier than logs, and to puff up the belly, and make it larger than any tun; and after this, it should promise not even to grant permission to cure him, to those who should be desirous of doing so, (for such is the way with power,) but would give him so much liberty as to punish any one that should approach him to withdraw him from what was harming him; well then, tell me, when wealth works these effects in the soul, how can it be honorable?

But this power is a more grievous thing than the disease itself; as for one in disease not to be obedient to the physician's injunctions is a more serious evil than the being diseased; and this is the case with wealth, seeing it creates inflammation in every part of the soul, and forbids the physicians to come near it. So let us not felicitate these on the score of their power, but pity them; for neither were I to see a dropsical patient lying, and nobody forbidding him to take his fill of whatever drinks he pleased and of meats that are harmful, would I felicitate him because of his power. For not in all cases is power a good thing, nor are honors either, for these too fill one with much arrogance. But if you would not choose that the body should

along with wealth contract such a disease, how do you come to overlook the soul, and when contracting not this scourge alone, but another also? For it is on fire all over with burning fevers and inflammations, and that burning fever none can quench, for wealth will not allow of this, having persuaded it that those things are gains, which are really losses, such as not enduring any one and doing everything at will. For no other soul will one find so replete with lusts so great and so extravagant, as theirs who are desirous of being rich. For what silly trifles do they not picture to themselves! One may see these devising more extravagant things than limners of hippocentaurs, and chimæras, and dragon-footed things, and Scyllas, and monsters. And if one should choose to give a picture of one lust of theirs, neither Scylla, nor chimæra, nor hippocentaur will appear anything at all by the side of such a prodigy; but you will find it to contain every wild beast at once.

And perchance some one will suppose that I have been myself possessed of much wealth, seeing I am so true to what really comes of it. It is reported of one (for I will first confirm what I have said from the legends of the Greeks) -- it is reported among them of a certain king, that he became so insolent in luxury, as to make a plane tree of gold, and a sky above it, and there sate, and this too when invading a people skilled in warfare. Now was not this lust hippocentaurean, was it not Scyllæan? Another, again, used to cast men into a wooden bull. Was not this a very Scylla? And even him, the king I just mentioned, the warrior, wealth made, from a man a woman, from a woman, what shall I say? A brute beast, and yet more degraded than this for the beasts, if they lodge under a tree, take up with nature, and seek for nothing further; but the man in question overshot the nature even of beasts.

What then can be more senseless than are the wealthy? And this arises from the greediness of their desires. But, are there not many that admire him? Therefore truly do they share in the laughter he incurs. That displayed not his wealth but his folly. How much better than that golden plane tree is that which the earth produces! For the natural is more grateful than the unnatural. But what meant that your golden heaven, O senseless one? Do you see how wealth that is abundant makes men mad? How it inflamed them? I suppose he knows not the sea even, and perchance will presently have a mind to walk upon it. Now is not this a chimaera? Is it not a hippocentaur? But there are, at this time also, some who fall not short even of him, but are actually much more senseless. For in point of senselessness, wherein do they differ, tell me, from that golden plane tree, who make silver jars, pitchers, and scent bottles? And wherein do those women differ, (ashamed indeed I am, but it is necessary to speak it,) who make chamber utensils of silver? It is ye should be ashamed, that are the makers of these things. When Christ is famishing, do you so revel in luxury? Yea rather, so play the fool! What punishment shall these not suffer? And do you inquire still, why there are robbers? Why murderers? Why such evils? When the devil has thus made you ridiculous. For the mere having of silver dishes indeed, this even is not in keeping with a soul devoted to wisdom, but is altogether a piece of luxury; but the making unclean vessels also of silver, is this then luxury? Nay, I will not call it luxury, but senselessness; nay, nor yet this, but madness; nay rather, worse than even madness.

I know that many persons make jokes at me for this; but I heed them not, only let some good result from it. In truth, to be wealthy does make people senseless and mad. Did their power reach to such an excess, they would have the earth too of gold, and walls of gold, perchance the heaven too, and the air of gold. What a madness is this, what an iniquity, what a burning fever! Another, made after the image of God, is perishing of cold; and do you furnish yourself with such things as these? O the senseless pride! What more would a madman have done? Do you pay such honor to your excrements, as to receive them in silver? I know that you are shocked at hearing this; but those women that make such things ought to be

shocked, and the husbands that minister to such distempers. For this is wantonness, and savageness, and inhumanity, and brutishness, and lasciviousness. What Scylla, what chimæra, what dragon, yea rather what demon, what devil would have acted on this wise? What is the benefit of Christ? What of the Faith? When one has to put up with men being heathens, yea rather, not heathens, but demons? If to adorn the head with gold and pearls be not right; one that uses silver for a service so unclean, how shall he obtain pardon? Is not the rest enough, although even it is not bearable, chairs and footstools all of silver? Although even these come of senselessness. But everywhere is excessive pride; everywhere is vainglory. Nowhere is it use, but everywhere excess.

I am afraid lest, under the impulse of this madness, the race of woman should go on to assume some portentous form: for it is likely that they will wish to have even their hair of gold. Else declare that you were not at all affected by what was said, nor were excited greatly, and fell a longing, and had not shame withheld you, would not have refused. For if they dare to do what is even more absurd than this, much more, I think, will they long for their hair, and lips, and eyebrows, and every part to be overlaid with molten gold.

But if you are incredulous, and think I am speaking in jest, I will relate what I have heard, or rather what is now existing. The king of the Persians wears his beard golden; those who are adepts at such work winding leaf of gold about his hairs as about the woof, and it is laid up as a prodigy.

Glory to You, O Christ; with how many good things have You filled us! How have You provided for our health! From how great monstrousness, from how great unreasonableness, have You set us free! Mark! I forewarn you, I advise no longer; but I command and charge; let him that wills, obey, and him that wills not, be disobedient; that if you women do continue thus to act, I will not suffer it, nor receive you, nor permit you to pass across this threshold. For what need have I of a crowd of distempered people? And what if, in my training of you, I do not forbid what is not excessive? And yet Paul forbade both gold and pearls. 1 Timothy 2:9 We are laughed at by the Greeks, our religion appears a fable.

And to the men I give this advice: Have you come to school to be instructed in spiritual philosophy? Divest yourself of that pride! This is my advice both to men and women; and if any act otherwise, henceforward I will not suffer it. The disciples were but twelve, and hear what Christ says unto them, Would ye also go away? John 6:67 For if we go on for ever flattering you, when shall we reclaim you? When shall we do you service? But, says one, there are other sects, and people go over. This is a cold argument, Better is one that does the will of the Lord, than ten thousand transgressors. Sirach 16:3 For, what would you choose yourself, tell me; to have ten thousand servants that were runaways and thieves, or a single one that loved you? Lo! I admonish and command you to break up both those gay deckings for the face, and such vessels as I have described, and give to the poor, and not to be so mad.

Let him that likes quit me at once; let him that likes accuse me, I will not suffer it in any one. When I am about to be judged at the Tribunal of Christ, you stand afar off, and your favor, while I am giving in my account. Those words have ruined all! He says, 'let him not go and transfer himself to another sect!' Nay! He is weak! condescend to him! To what point? Till when? Once, and twice, and thrice, but not perpetually.

Lo! I charge you again, and protest after the pattern of the blessed Paul, that if I come again I will not spare. 2 Corinthians 13:2 But when you have done as you ought, then you will know how great the gain is, how great the advantage. Yes! I entreat and beseech you, and would not refuse to clasp your knees and

supplicate you in this behalf. What softness is it! What luxury, what wantonness! This is not luxury, but wantonness. What senselessness is it! What madness! So many poor stand around the Church; and though the Church has so many children, and so wealthy, she is unable to give relief to even one poor person; but one is hungry, and another is drunken 1 Corinthians 11:21; one voids his excrement even into silver, another has not so much as bread! What madness! What brutishness so great as this? May we never come to the proof, whether we will prosecute the disobedient, nor to the indignation which allowing these practices would cause us; but that willingly and with patience we may avoid all this, that we may live to God's glory, and be delivered from the punishment in the other world, and may obtain the good things promised to those who love Him, through the grace and love toward man, etc.

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