

# Hebrews 11:13-16

by St. John Chrysostom

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of living a virtuous life, being strangers to the world, and keeping God's commandments to attain the good things promised.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 39:12, Matthew 7:22, 2 Corinthians 5:4, Galatians 6:14, Hebrews 11:13

**Topics:** "Heavenly Aspirations", "Spiritual Detachment"

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## Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the virtue of being strangers and sojourners on earth, emphasizing the importance of living a life detached from worldly desires and focused on heavenly aspirations. He contrasts the righteous, who seek a heavenly country and are not ashamed to be called God's own, with the wicked who are consumed by earthly pleasures and face the consequences of their actions. Chrysostom urges the congregation to live virtuously, cultivate good habits, and strive for purity of heart and life, highlighting that God values an excellent course of life above miracles and signs.

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## Transcript

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things, declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly; wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared for them a city.

1. The first virtue, yea the whole of virtue, is to be a stranger to this world, and a sojourner, and to have nothing in common with things here, but to hang loose from them, as from things strange to us; As those blessed disciples did, of whom he says, They wandered about in sheepskins, and in goat-skins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented: of whom the world was not worthy. c. xi. 37, 38

They called themselves therefore strangers; but Paul said somewhat much beyond this: for not merely did he call himself a stranger, but said that he was dead to the world, and that the world was dead to him. For the world (he says) has been crucified to me and I to the world. Galatians 6:14 But we, both citizens and quite alive, busy ourselves about everything here as citizens. And what righteous men were to the world, strangers and dead, that we are to Heaven. And what they were to Heaven, alive and acting as citizens, that we are to the world. Wherefore we are dead, because we have refused that which is truly life, and have chosen this which is but for a time. Wherefore we have provoked God to wrath, because when the

enjoyments of Heaven have been set before us, we are not willing to be separated from things on earth, but, like worms, we turn about from the earth to the earth, and again from this to that; and in short are not willing to look up even for a little while, nor to withdraw ourselves from human affairs, but as if drowned in torpor and sleep and drunkenness, we are stupefied with imaginations.

2. And as those who are under the power of sweet sleep lie on their bed not only during the night, but even when the morning has over-taken them, and bright day has come, and are not ashamed to indulge in pleasure, and to make the season of business and activity a time of slumber and indolence, so truly we also, when the day is drawing near, when the night is far spent, or rather the day; for work (it is said) while it is day John 9:4; when it is day we practice all that belongs to the night, sleeping, dreaming, indulging in luxurious fancies; and the eyes of our understanding are closed as well as those of our body; we speak amiss, we talk absurdly; even if a person inflict a deep wound upon us, if he carry off all our substance, if he set the very house on fire, we are not so much as conscious of it.

Or rather, we do not even wait for others to do this, but we do it ourselves, piercing and wounding ourselves every day, lying in unseemly fashion, and stripped bare of all credit, all honor, neither ourselves concealing our shameful deeds, nor permitting others to do so, but lying exposed to public shame, to the ridicule, the numberless jests of spectators and passers-by.

3. Do ye not suppose that the wicked themselves laugh at those who are of like characters to themselves, and condemn them? For since God has placed within us a tribunal which cannot be bribed nor ever utterly destroyed, even though we come to the very lowest depth of vice; therefore even the wicked themselves give sentence against themselves, and if one call them that which they are, they are ashamed, they are angry, they say that it is an insult. Thus they condemn what they do, even if not by their deeds, yet by their words, by their conscience, nay rather even by their deeds. For when they carry on their practices out of sight and secretly, they give the strongest proof of the opinion they hold concerning the thing itself. For wickedness is so manifest, that all men are its accusers, even those who follow after it, while such is the quality of virtue, that it is admired even by those who do not emulate it. For even the fornicator will praise chastity, and the covetous will condemn injustice, and the passionate will admire patience, and blame quarrelsomeness, and the wanton [will blame] wantonness.

How then (you say) does he pursue these things? From excessive indolence, not because he judges it good; otherwise he would not have been ashamed of the thing itself, nor would he have denied it when another accused him. Nay many when caught, not enduring the shame, have even hanged themselves. So strong is the witness within us in behalf of what is good and becoming. Thus what is good is brighter than the sun, and the contrary more unsightly than anything.

4. The saints were strangers and sojourners. How and in what way? And where does Abraham confess himself a stranger and a sojourner? Probably indeed he even himself confessed it: but David both confessed I am a stranger and what? As all my fathers were. Psalm 39:12 For they who dwell in tents, they who purchase even burial places for money, evidently were in some sense strangers, as they had not even where to bury their dead.

What then? Did they mean that they were strangers from the land that is in Palestine? By no means: but in respect of the whole world: and with reason; for they saw therein none of the things which they wished for, but everything foreign and strange. They indeed wished to practice virtue: but here there was much wickedness, and things were quite foreign to them. They had no friend, no familiar acquaintance, save

only some few.

But how were they strangers? They had no care for things here. And this they showed not by words, but by their deeds. In what way?

He said to Abraham, Leave that which seems your country and come to one that is foreign: And he did not cleave to his kindred, but gave it up as unconcernedly as if he were about to leave a foreign land. He said to him, Offer up your son, and he offered him up as if he had no son; as if he had divested himself of his nature, so he offered him up. The wealth which he had acquired was common to all passers-by, and this he accounted as nothing. He yielded the first places to others: he threw himself into dangers; he suffered troubles innumerable. He built no splendid houses, he enjoyed no luxuries, he had no care about dress, which all are things of this world; but lived in all respects as belonging to the City yonder; he showed hospitality, brotherly love, mercifulness, forbearance, contempt for wealth and for present glory, and for all else.

And his son too was such as himself: when he was driven away, when war was made on him, he yielded and gave way, as being in a foreign land. For foreigners, whatever they suffer, endure it, as not being in their own country. Even when his wife was taken from him, he endured this also as being in a strange land: and lived in all respects as one whose home was above, showing sobermindedness and a well-ordered life. For after he had begotten a son, he had no more commerce with his wife, and it was when the flower of his youth had passed that he married her, showing that he did it not from passion, but in subservience to the promise of God.

And what did Jacob? Did he not seek bread only and raiment, which are asked for by those who are truly strangers; by those that have come to great poverty? When he was driven out, did he not as a stranger give place? Did he not serve for hire? Did he not suffer afflictions innumerable, everywhere, as a stranger?

5. And these things (he says) they said, seeking their own country. Ah! How great is the difference! They indeed were in travail-pains each day, wishing to be released from this world, and to return to their country. But we, on the contrary, if a fever attack us, neglecting everything, weeping like little children, are frightened at death.

Not without reason we are thus affected. For since we do not live here like strangers, nor as if hastening to our country, but are like persons that are going away to punishment, therefore we grieve, because we have not used circumstances as we ought, but have turned order upside down. Hence we grieve when we ought to rejoice: hence we shudder, like murderers or robber chiefs, when they are going to be brought before the judgment-seat, and are thinking over all the things they have done, and therefore are fearful and trembling.

They, however, were not such, but pressed on. And Paul even groaned; And we (he says) that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened. 2 Corinthians 5:4 Such were they who were with Abraham; strangers, he says, they were in respect of the whole world, and they sought a country.

What sort of country was this? Was it that which they had left? By no means. For what hindered them if they wished, from returning again, and becoming citizens? But they sought that which is in Heaven? Thus they desired their departure hence, and so they pleased God; for God was not ashamed to be called their God.

6. Ah! How great a dignity! He vouch-safed to be called their God. What do you say? He is called the God of the earth, and the God of Heaven, and have you set it down as a great thing that He is not ashamed to be called their God? Great and truly great this is, and a proof of exceeding blessedness. How? Because He is called God of earth and of heaven as also of the Gentiles: in that He created and formed them: but [God] of those holy men, not in this sense, but as some true friend.

And I will make it plain to you by an example; as in the case of [slaves] in large households, when any of those placed over the household are very highly esteemed, and manage everything themselves, and can use great freedom towards their masters, the Master is called after them, and one may find many so called. But what do I say? As we might say the God, not of the Gentiles but of the world, so we might say the God of Abraham. But you do not know how great a dignity this is, because we do not attain to it. For as now He is called the Lord of all Christians, and yet the name goes beyond our deserts: consider the greatness if He were called the God of one [person]! He who is called the God of the whole world is not ashamed to be called the God of three men: and with good reason: for the saints would turn the scale, I do not say against the world but against ten thousand such. For one man who does the will of the Lord, is better than ten thousand transgressors. Sirach 16:3

Now that they called themselves strangers in this sense is manifest. But supposing that they said they were strangers on account of the strange land, why did David also [call himself a stranger]? Was not he a king? Was not he a prophet? Did he not spend his life in his own country? Why then does he say, I am a stranger and a sojourner? Psalm 39:12 How are you a stranger? As (he says) all my fathers were. Do you see that they too were strangers? We have a country, he means, but not really our country. But how art you yourself a stranger? As to the earth. Therefore they also [were strangers] in respect of the earth: For as they were, he says, so also am I; and as he, so they too.

7. Let us even now become strangers; that God may not be ashamed of us to be called our God. For it is a shame to Him, when He is called the God of the wicked, and He also is ashamed of them; as He is glorified when He is [called the God] of the good and the kind, and of them that cultivate virtue. For if we decline to be called the masters of our wicked slaves, and give them up; and should any one come to us and say, 'such a one does innumerable bad things, he is your slave, is he not?' We immediately say, by no means, to get rid of the disgrace: for a slave has a close relation to his master, and the discredit passes from the one to the other. -- But they were so illustrious, so full of confidence, that not only was He not ashamed to be called from them, but He even Himself says, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Exodus 3:6

Let us also, my beloved, become strangers; that God may not be ashamed of us; that He may not be ashamed, and deliver us up to Hell. Such were they who said, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your Name, and in Your Name have done many wonderful works! Matthew 7:22 But see what Christ says to them: I know you not: the very thing which masters would do, when wicked slaves run to them, wishing to be rid of the disgrace. I know you not, He says. How then dost Thou punish those whom You know not? I said, I know not, in a different sense: that is, I deny you, and renounce you. But God forbid that we should hear this fatal and terrible utterance. For if they who cast out demons and prophesied, were denied, because their life was not suitable thereto; how much more we!

8. And how (you ask) is it possible that they should be denied, who have shown prophetic powers, and wrought miracles, and cast out demons? Is it probable they were afterwards changed, and became wicked; and therefore were nothing benefited, even by their former virtue. For not only ought we to have

our beginnings splendid, but the end also more splendid still.

For tell me, does not the Orator take pains to make the end of his speech splendid, that he may retire with applause? Does not the public officer make the most splendid display at the close of his administration? The wrestler, if he do not make a more splendid display and conquer unto the end, and if after vanquishing all he be vanquished by the last, is not all unprofitable to him? Should the pilot have crossed the whole ocean, yet if he wreck his vessel at the port, has he not lost all his former labor? And what [of] the Physician? If, after he has freed the sick man from his disease, when he is on the point of discharging him cured, he should then destroy him, has he not destroyed everything? So too in respect of Virtue, as many as have not added an end suitable to the beginning, and in unison and harmony with it, are ruined, and undone. Such are they who have sprung forth from the starting place bright and exulting, and afterwards have become faint and feeble. Therefore they are both deprived of the prize, and are not acknowledged by their master.

Let us listen to these things, those of us who are in love of wealth: for this is the greatest iniquity. For the love of money is the root of all evil. 1 Timothy 6:10 Let us listen, those of us who wish to make our present possessions greater, let us listen and sometime cease from our covetousness, that we may not hear the same things as they [will hear]. Let us listen to them now, and be on our guard, that we may not hear them then. Let us listen now with fear, that we may not then listen with vengeance: Depart from Me (He says); I never knew you Matthew 7:23, no not even then (He means) when you made a display of prophesying, and were casting out demons.

It is probable that He also here hints at something else, that even then they were wicked; and from the beginning, grace wrought even by the unworthy. For if it wrought through Balaam, much more through the unworthy, for the sake of those who shall profit [by it].

But if even signs and wonders did not avail to deliver from punishment; much more, if a man happen to be in the priestly dignity: even if he reach the highest honor, even if grace work in him to ordination, even if unto all the other things, for the sake of those who need his leadership, he also shall hear, I never knew you, no, not even then when grace wrought in you.

9. O! How strict shall the search be there as to purity of life! How does that, of itself, suffice to introduce us into the kingdom? While the absence of it gives up the man [to destruction], though he have ten thousand miracles and signs to show. For nothing is so pleasing to God as an excellent course of life. If you love Me John 14:15, He declares; He did not say, work miracles, but what? Keep My commandments. And again, I call you friends John 15:14, not when you cast out demons, but if you keep My words. For those things come of the gift of God: but these after the gift of God, of our own diligence also. Let us strive to become friends of God, and not remain enemies to Him.

These things we are ever saying, these exhortations we are ever giving, both to ourselves and to you: but nothing more is gained. Wherefore also I am afraid. And I would have wished indeed to be silent, so as not to increase your danger. For when a person often hears, and even so does not act, this is to provoke the Lord to anger. But I fear also myself that other danger, that of silence, if when I am appointed to the ministering of the word, I should hold my peace.

What shall we then do that we may be saved? Let us begin [the practice of] virtue, as we have opportunity: let us portion out the virtues to ourselves, as laborers do their husbandry; in this month let us master evil-speaking, injuriousness, unjust anger; and let us lay down a law for ourselves, and say, Today let us

set this right. Again, in this month let us school ourselves in forbearance, and in another, in some other virtue: And when we have got into the habit of this virtue let us go to another, just as in the things we learn at school, guarding what is already gained, and acquiring others.

After this let us proceed to contempt for riches. First let us restrain our hands from grasping, and then let us give alms. Let us not simply confound everything, with the same hands both slaying and showing mercy forsooth. After this, let us go to some other virtue, and from that, to another. Filthiness and foolish talking and jesting, let it not be even named among you. Ephesians 5:4 Let us be thus far in the right way.

There is no need of spending money, there is no need of labor, none of sweat, it is enough to have only the will, and all is done. There is no need to travel a long way, nor to cross a boundless ocean, but to be in earnest and of ready mind, and to put a bridle on the tongue. Unseasonable reproaches, anger, disorderly lusts, luxuriousness, expensiveness, let us cast off; and the desire of wealth also from our soul, perjury and habitual oaths.

If we thus cultivate ourselves, plucking out the former thorns, and casting in the heavenly seed, we shall be able to attain the good things promised. For the Husbandman will come and will lay us up in His Garner, and we shall attain to all good things, which may we all attain, by the grace and lovingkindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom to the Father together with the Holy Ghost, be glory, power, honor, now and for ever, and world without end. Amen.

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