

Hebrews 12:11-15

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon explores the nature of divine discipline, the importance of community, and the necessity of mutual support in the Christian journey.

Scripture: Proverbs 18:19, 1 Corinthians 6:9, Galatians 6:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, 1 Timothy 4:14, Hebrews 12:11, Hebrews 12:14-15

Topics: "Perseverance Through Trials", "Christian Accountability"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of enduring chastisement and trials, comparing it to bitter medicine that yields the fruit of righteousness in the end. He encourages believers to lift up their hands and make straight paths, emphasizing the need to endure patiently and have faith in the good outcome of their struggles. Chrysostom urges the congregation to follow peace with all men, live in holiness, and support each other in their spiritual journey, highlighting the significance of mutual encouragement and accountability. He stresses the importance of reproving and exhorting one another with gentleness and love, reminding them that by bearing each other's burdens, they fulfill the law of Christ and contribute to each other's edification.

Transcript

No chastening for the present seems to be joyous, but grievous, nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby. Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees: and make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way, but let it rather be healed.

1. They who drink bitter medicines, first submit to some unpleasantness, and afterwards feel the benefit. For such is virtue, such is vice. In the latter there is first the pleasure, then the despondency: in the former first the despondency, and then the pleasure. But there is no equality; for it is not the same, to be first grieved and afterwards pleased, and to be first pleased and afterwards grieved. How so? Because in the latter case the expectation of coming despondency makes the present pleasure less: but in the former the expectation of coming pleasure cuts away the violence of present despondency; so that the result is that in the one instance we never have pleasure, in the latter we never have grief. And the difference does not lie in this only, but also in other ways. As how? That the duration is not equal, but far greater and more ample. And here too, it is still more so in things spiritual.

From this [consideration] then Paul undertakes to console them; and again takes up the common judgment of men, which no one is able to stand against, nor to contend with the common decision, when one says what is acknowledged by all.

You are suffering, he says. For such is chastisement; such is its beginning. For no chastening for the present seems to be joyous but grievous. Well said he, seems not. Chastisement he means is not grievous but seems so. All chastisement: not this and that, but all, both human and spiritual. Do you see that he argues from our common notions? Seems (he says) to be grievous, so that it is not [really so]. For what sort of grief brings forth joy? So neither does pleasure bring forth despondency.

Nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruits of righteousness to them which have been exercised thereby. Not fruit but fruits, a great abundance.

To them (he says) which have been exercised thereby. What is to them which have been exercised thereby? To them that have endured for a long while, and been patient. And he uses an auspicious expression. So then, chastisement is exercise, making the athlete strong, and invincible in combats, irresistible in wars.

If then all chastisement be such, this also will be such: so that we ought to look for good things, and for a sweet and peaceful end. And do not wonder if, being itself hard, it has sweet fruits; since in trees also the bark is almost destitute of all quality, and rough; but the fruits are sweet. But he took it from the common notion. If therefore we ought to look for such things, why do ye vex yourselves? Why, after you have endured the painful, do ye despond as to the good? The distasteful things which you had to endure, you endured: do not then despond as to the recompense.

He speaks as to runners, and boxers, and warriors. Do you see how he arms them, how he encourages them? Walk straight, he says. Here he speaks with reference to their thoughts; that is to say, not doubting. For if the chastisement be of love, if it begin from loving care, if it end with a good result (and this he proves both by facts and by words, and by all considerations), why are you dispirited? For such are they who despair, who are not strengthened by the hope of the future. Walk straight, he says, that your lameness may not be increased, but brought back to its former condition. For he that runs when he is lame, galls the sore place. Do you see that it is in our power to be thoroughly healed?

Hebrews 12:14

2. Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord. What he also said above, Not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together Hebrews 10:25, he hints at in this place also. For nothing so especially makes persons easily vanquished and subdued in temptations, as isolation. For, tell me, scatter a phalanx in war, and the enemy will need no trouble, but will take them prisoners, coming on them separately, and thereby the more helpless.

Follow peace with all men, and holiness (he says). Therefore with the evil-doers as well? If it be possible, he says, as much as lies in you, live peaceably with all men. Romans 12:18 For your part (he means) live peaceably, doing no harm to religion: but in whatever you are ill-treated, bear it nobly. For the bearing with evil is a great weapon in trials. Thus Christ also made His disciples strong by saying, Behold I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves, Matthew 10:16 What dost Thou say? Are we among wolves, and dost Thou bid us to be as sheep, and as doves? Yea, He says. For nothing so shames him that is doing us evil, as bearing nobly the things which are

brought upon us: and not avenging ourselves either by word or by deed. This both makes us more philosophical ourselves and procures a greater reward, and also benefits them. But has such an one been insolent? Do thou bless [him]. See how much you will gain from this: you have quenched the evil, you have procured to yourself a reward, you have made him ashamed, and you have suffered nothing serious.

3. Follow peace with all men, and holiness. What does he mean by holiness ? Chaste, and orderly living in marriage. If any person is unmarried (he says) let him remain pure, let him marry: or if he be married, let him not commit fornication, but let him live with his own wife: for this also is holiness. How? Marriage is not holiness, but marriage preserves the holiness which [proceeds] from Faith, not permitting union with a harlot. For marriage is honorable Hebrews 13:4, not holy. Marriage is pure: it does not however also give holiness, except by forbidding the defilement of that [holiness] which has been given by our Faith.

Without which (he says) no man shall see the Lord. Which he also says in the [Epistle] to the Corinthians. Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor adulterers, nor idolaters, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor covetous persons, nor thieves, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 For how shall he who has become the body of a harlot, how shall he be able to be the body of Christ?

Hebrews 12:15

4. Looking diligently lest any man come short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled: lest there be any fornicator or profane person. Do you see how everywhere he puts the common salvation into the hands of each individual? Exhorting one another daily (he says) while it is called Today. Hebrews 3:13 Do not then cast all [the burden] on your teachers; do not [cast] all upon them who have the rule over you: ye also (he means) are able to edify one another. Which also he said in writing to the Thessalonians, Edify one another, even as also ye do. 1 Thessalonians 5:11 And again, Comfort one another with these words. 1 Thessalonians 4:18 This we also now exhort you.

5. If you be willing, you will have more success with each other than we can have. For you both are with one another for a longer time, and you know more than we of each other's affairs, and you are not ignorant of each other's failings, and you have more freedom of speech, and love, and intimacy; and these are no small [advantages] for teaching, but great and opportune introductions for it: ye will be more able than we both to reprove and to exhort. And not this only, but because I am but one, whereas you are many; and you will be able, however many, to be teachers. Wherefore I entreat you, do not neglect this gift. 1 Timothy 4:14 Each one of you has a wife, has a friend, has a servant, has a neighbor; let him reprove him, let him exhort him.

For how is it not absurd, with regard to [bodily] nourishment, to make associations for messing together, and for drinking together, and to have a set day whereon to club with one another, as they say, and to make up by the association what each person being alone by himself fails short of -- as for instance, if it be necessary to go to a funeral, or to a dinner, or to assist a neighbor in any matter -- and not to do this for the purpose of instruction in virtue? Yea, I entreat you, let no man neglect it. For great is the reward he receives from God. And that you may understand, he who was entrusted with the five talents is the teacher: and he with the one is the learner. If the learner should say, I am a learner, I run no risk, and should hide the reason, which he received of God, that common and simple [reason], and give no advice, should not speak plainly, should not rebuke, should not admonish, if he is able, but should bury [his talents] in the earth (for truly that heart is earth and ashes, which hides the gift of God): if then he hides it

either from indolence, or from wickedness, it will be no defense to him to say, 'I had but one talent.' You had one talent. You ought then to have brought one besides, and to have doubled the talent. If you had brought one in addition, you would not have been blamed. For neither did He say to him who brought the two, Wherefore have you not brought five? But He accounted him of the same worth with him who brought the five. Why? Because he gained as much as he had. And, because he had received fewer than the one entrusted with the five, he was not on this account negligent, nor did he use the smallness [of his trust, as an excuse] for idleness. And you ought not to have looked to him who had the two; or rather, you ought to have looked to him, and as he having two imitated him who had five, so ought thou to have emulated him who had two. For if for him who has means and does not give, there is punishment, how shall there not be the greatest punishment for him who is able to exhort in any way, and does it not? In the former case the body is nourished, in the latter the soul; there you prevent temporal death, here eternal.

6. But I have no [skill of] speech, you say. But there is no need of [skill of] speech nor of eloquence. If you see a friend going into fornication, say to him, You are going after an evil thing; are you not ashamed? Do you not blush? This is wrong. 'Why, does he not know' (you say) 'that it is wrong?' Yes, but he is dragged on by lust. They that are sick also know that it is bad to drink cold water, nevertheless they need persons who shall hinder [them from it]. For he who is suffering, will not easily be able to help himself in his sickness. There is need therefore of you who art in health, for his cure. And if he be not persuaded by your words, watch for him as he goes away and hold him fast; perhaps he will be ashamed.

'And what advantage is it' (you say), 'when he does this for my sake, and because he has been held back by me?' Do not be too minute in your calculations. For a while, by whatever means, withdraw him from his evil practice; let him be accustomed not to go off to that pit, whether through you, or through any means whatever. When you have accustomed him not to go, then by taking him after he has gained breath a little you will be able to teach him that he ought to do this for God's sake, and not for man's. Do not wish to make all right at once, since you cannot: but do it gently and by degrees.

If you see him going off to drinking, or to parties where there is nothing but drunkenness, then also do the same; and again on the other hand intreat him, if he observe that you have any failing, to help you and set you right. For in this way, he will even of himself, bear reproof, when he sees both that you need reproofs as well, and that you help him, not as one that had done everything right, nor as a teacher, but as a friend and a brother. Say to him, I have done you a service, in reminding you of things expedient: do thou also, whatever failing you see me have, hold me back, set me right. If you see me irritable, if avaricious, restrain me, bind me by exhortation.

This is friendship; thus brother aided by brother becomes a fortified city. Proverbs 18:19 For not eating and drinking makes friendship: such friendship even robbers have and murderers. But if we are friends, if we truly care for one another, let us in these respects help one another. This leads us to a profitable friendship: let us hinder those things which lead away to hell.

7. Therefore let not him that is reproved be indignant: for we are men and we have failings; neither let him who reproves do it as exulting over him and making a display, but privately, with gentleness. He that reproves has need of greater gentleness, that thus he may persuade [them] to bear the cutting. Do you not see surgeons, when they burn, when they cut, with how great gentleness they apply their treatment? Much more ought those who reprove others to act thus. For reproof is sharper even than fire and knife, and makes [men] start. On this account surgeons take great pains to make them bear the cutting quietly, and apply it as tenderly as possible, even giving in a little, then giving time to take breath.

So ought we also to offer reproofs, that the reproofed may not start away. Even if therefore, it be necessary to be insulted, yea even to be struck, let us not decline it. For those also who are cut [by the surgeons] utter numberless cries against those who are cutting them; they however heed none of these things, but only the health of the patients. So indeed in this case also we ought to do all things that our reproof may be effectual, to bear all things, looking to the reward which is in store.

Bear ye one another's burdens, says he, and so fulfill the law of Christ. Galatians 6:2 So then, both reproving and bearing with one another, shall we be able to fulfill edification. And thus will you make the labor light for us, in all things taking a part with us, and stretching out a hand, and becoming sharers and partakers, both in one another's salvation, and each one in his own. Let us then endure patiently, both bearing one another's burdens, and reproving: that we may attain to the good things promised in Christ Jesus our Lord, with whom to the Father together with the Holy Ghost, be glory, might, honor, now and for ever and world without end. Amen.

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