

# Hebrews 12:14-17

by St. John Chrysostom

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of following peace with all men and holiness, and the consequences of failing to do so, highlighting the need for repentance, remembrance, and a commitment to follow God.*

**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 29:18, Psalm 6:6, Matthew 25:41, John 13:35, 1 Corinthians 8:11, Hebrews 12:14, Hebrews 12:16-17

**Topics:** "Christian Living", "Repentance"

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## Description

John Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of love, peace, and holiness in Christianity, quoting Jesus and Paul to highlight the significance of following peace with all men and pursuing purity to see the Lord. He warns against failing to extend grace to others and allowing bitterness to take root, leading to defilement. Chrysostom uses the example of Esau to caution against fornication and worldly desires that can lead to losing spiritual blessings. He delves into the concept of repentance, urging believers to repent sincerely and avoid falling into irreparable sins, emphasizing the need for continual remembrance of one's sins and genuine contrition.

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## Transcript

Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no one shall see the Lord.

1. There are many things characteristic of Christianity: but more than all, and better than all, Love towards one another, and Peace. Therefore Christ also says, My peace I give unto you. John 14:27 And again, By this shall all men know that you are My disciples, if you love one another. John 13:35 Therefore Paul too says, Follow peace with all men, and holiness, that is, purity, without which no man shall see the Lord .

Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God. As if they were traveling together on some long journey, in a large company, he says, Take heed that no man be left behind: I do not seek this only, that you should arrive yourselves, but also that you should look diligently after the others.

Lest any man (he says) fail of the grace of God. (He means the good things to come, the faith of the gospel, the best course of life: for they all are of the Grace of God.) Do not tell me, It is [but] one that perishes. Even for one Christ died. Have you no care for him for whom Christ died? 1 Corinthians 8:11

Looking diligently, he says, that is, searching carefully, considering, thoroughly ascertaining, as is done in the case of sick persons, and in all ways examining, thoroughly ascertaining. Lest any root of bitterness

springing up trouble you. Deuteronomy 29:18 This is found in Deuteronomy; and he derived it from the metaphor of plants. Lest any root of bitterness, he says; which he said also in another place when he writes, A little leaven leavens the whole lump. 1 Corinthians 5:6 Not for his sake alone do I wish this, he means, but also on account of the harm arising therefrom. That is to say, even if there be a root of this kind, do not suffer any shoot to come up, but let it be cut off, that it may not bear its proper fruits, that so it may not defile and pollute the others also. For, he says, Lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you; and by it many be defiled.

And with good reason did he call sin bitter: for truly nothing is more bitter than sin, and they know it, who after they have committed it pine away under their conscience, who endure much bitterness. For being exceedingly bitter, it perverts the reasoning faculty itself. Such is the nature of what is bitter: it is unprofitable.

And well said he, root of bitterness. He said not, bitter, but of bitterness. For it is possible that a bitter root might bear sweet fruits; but it is not possible that a root and fountain and foundation of bitterness, should ever bear sweet fruit; for all is bitter, it has nothing sweet, all are bitter, all unpleasant, all full of hatred and abomination.

And by this (he says) many be defiled. That is, Cut off the lascivious persons.

Hebrews 12:16

2. Lest there be any fornicator: or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright.

And wherein was Esau a fornicator? He does not say that Esau was a fornicator. Lest there be any fornicator, he says, then, follow after holiness: lest there be any, as Esau, profane: that is, gluttonous, without self-control, worldly, selling away things spiritual.

Who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright, who through his own slothfulness sold this honor which he had from God, and for a little pleasure, lost the greatest honor and glory. This was suitable to them. This [was the conduct] of an abominable, of an unclean person. So that not only is the fornicator unclean, but also the glutton, the slave of his belly. For he also is a slave of a different pleasure. He is forced to be overreaching, he is forced to be rapacious, to behave himself unseemly in ten thousand ways, being the slave of that passion, and oftentimes he blasphemes. So he accounted his birthright to be nothing worth. That is, providing for temporary refreshment, he went even to the [sacrifice of his] birthright. So henceforth the birthright belongs to us, not to the Jews. And at the same time also this is added to their calamity, that the first has become last, and the second, first: the one, for courageous endurance; the other last for indolence.

Hebrews 12:17

3. For you know (he says) how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected. For he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears. What now is this? Does he indeed exclude repentance? By no means. 'But how, you say, was it that he found no place of repentance?' For if he condemned himself, if he made a great wailing, why did he find no place of repentance? Because it was not really a case of repentance. For as the grief of Cain was not of repentance, and the murder proved it; so also in this case, his words were not those of repentance, and the murder afterwards proved it. For even he also in intention slew Jacob. For The days of mourning for

my father, he said, are at hand; then will I slay my brother Jacob. Genesis 27:41 Tears had not power to give him repentance. And [the Apostle] did not say by repentance simply, but even with tears, he found no place of repentance. Why now? Because he did not repent as he ought, for this is repentance; he repented not as it behooved him.

For how is it that he [the Apostle] said this? How did he exhort them again after they had become sluggish Hebrews 6:12? How, when they had become lame? How, when they were paralyzed Hebrews 12:13? How, when they were relaxed Hebrews 12:12? For this is the beginning of a fall. He seems to me to hint at some fornicators among them, but not to wish at that time to correct them: but feigns ignorance that they might correct themselves. For it is right at first indeed to pretend ignorance: but afterwards, when they continue [in sin], then to add reproof also, that so they may not become shameless. Which Moses also did in the case of Zimri and the daughter of Cosbi.

For he found (he says) no place of repentance, he found not repentance; or that he sinned beyond repentance. There are then sins beyond repentance. His meaning is, Let us not fall by an incurable fall. So long as it is a matter of lameness, it is easy to become upright: but if we turn out of the way, what will be left? For it is to those who have not yet fallen that he thus discourses, striking them with terror, and says that it is not possible for him who is fallen to obtain consolation; but to those who have fallen, that they may not fall into despair, he says the contrary, speaking thus, My little children, of whom I travail in birth again, until Christ he formed in you. Galatians 4:19 And again, Whosoever of you are justified by the Law, are fallen from Grace. Galatians 5:4 Lo! He testifies that they had fallen away. For he that stands, hearing that it is not possible to obtain pardon after having fallen, will be more zealous, and more cautious about his standing: if however thou use the same violence towards one also who is fallen, he will never rise again. For by what hope will he show forth the change?

But he not only wept (you say), but also sought earnestly. He does not then exclude repentance; but makes them careful not to fall.

4. As many then as do not believe in Hell, let them call these things to mind: as many as think to sin without being punished, let them take account of these things. Why did Esau not obtain pardon? Because he repented not as he ought. Would you see perfect repentance? Hear of the repentance of Peter after his denial. For the Evangelist in relating to us the things concerning him, says, And he went out and wept bitterly. Matthew 26:75 Therefore even such a sin was forgiven him, because he repented as he ought. Although the Victim had not yet been offered, nor had The Sacrifice as yet been made, nor was sin as yet-taken away, it still had the rule and sovereignty.

And that you may learn, that this denial [arose] not so much from sloth, as from His being forsaken of God, who was teaching him to know the measures of man and not to contradict the sayings of the Master, nor to be more high-minded than the rest, but to know that nothing can be done without God, and that Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it Psalm 127:1: therefore also Christ said to him alone, Satan desired to sift you as wheat, and I allowed it not, that your faith may not fail. Luke 22:31-32 For since it was likely that he would be high-minded, being conscious to himself that he loved Christ more than they all, therefore he wept bitterly; and he did other things after his weeping, of the same character. For what did he do? After this he exposed himself to dangers innumerable, and by many means showed his manliness and courage.

Judas also repented, but in an evil way: for he hanged himself. Esau too repented; as I said; or rather, he did not even repent; for his tears were not [tears] of repentance, but rather of pride and wrath. And what followed proved this. The blessed David repented, thus saying, Every night will I wash my bed: I will water my couch with my tears. Psalm 6:6 And the sin which had been committed long ago, after so many years, after so many generations he bewailed, as if it had recently occurred.

5. For he who repents ought not to be angry, nor to be fierce, but to be contrite, as one condemned, as not having boldness, as one on whom sentence has been passed, as one who ought to be saved by mercy alone, as one who has shown himself ungrateful toward his Benefactor, as unthankful, as reprobate, as worthy of punishments innumerable. If he considers these things, he will not be angry, he will not be indignant, but will mourn, will weep, will groan, and lament night and day.

He that is penitent ought never to forget his sin, but on the one hand, to beseech God not to remember it; while on the other, he himself never forgets it. If we remember it, God will forget it. Let us exact punishment from ourselves; let us accuse ourselves; thus shall we propitiate the Judge. For sin confessed becomes less, but not confessed worse. For if sin add to itself shamelessness and ingratitude, how will he who does not know that he sinned before be at all able to guard himself from falling again into the same [evils]?

Let us then not deny [our sins], I beseech you, nor be shameless, that we may not unwillingly pay the penalty. Cain heard God say, Where is Abel your brother? And he said, I know not; am I my brother's keeper? Genesis 4:9 Do you see how this made his sin more grievous? But his father did not act thus. What then? When he heard, Adam, where are you? Genesis 3:9, he said, I heard Your voice, and I was afraid, because I am naked, and I hid myself. Genesis 3:10 It is a great good to acknowledge our sins, and to bear them in mind continually. Nothing so effectually cures a fault, as a continual remembrance of it. Nothing makes a man so slow to wickedness.

6. I know that conscience starts back, and endures not to be scourged by the remembrance of evil deeds; but hold tight your soul and place a muzzle on it. For like an ill-broken horse, so it bears impatiently [what is put upon it], and is unwilling to persuade itself that it has sinned: but all this is the work of Satan. But let us persuade it that it has sinned; let us persuade it that it has sinned, that it may also repent, in order that having repented it may escape torment. How do you think to obtain pardon for your sins, tell me, when you have not yet confessed them? Assuredly he is worthy of compassion and kindness who has sinned. But thou who hast not yet persuaded yourself [that you have sinned], how do you think to be pitied, when you are thus without shame for some things?

Let us persuade ourselves that we have sinned. Let us say it not with the tongue only, but also with the mind. Let us not call ourselves sinners, but also count over our sins, going over them each specifically. I do not say to you, Make a parade of yourself, nor accuse yourself before others: but be persuaded by the prophet when he says, Reveal your way unto the Lord. Psalm 37:5 Confess these things before God. Confess before the Judge your sins with prayer; if not with tongue, yet in memory, and be worthy of mercy.

If you keep your sins continually in remembrance, you will never bear in mind the wrongs of your neighbor. I do not say, if you are persuaded that you are yourself a sinner; this does not avail so to humble the soul, as sins themselves [taken] by themselves, and examined specifically. You will have no remembrance of wrongs [done you], if you have these things continually in remembrance; you will feel no anger, you will not revile, you will have no high thoughts, you will not fall again into the same [sins], you will be more

earnest towards good things.

7. Do you see how many excellent [effects] are produced from the remembrance of our sins? Let us then write them in our minds. I know that the soul does not endure a recollection which is so bitter: but let us constrain and force it. It is better that it should be gnawed with the remembrance now, than at that time with vengeance.

Now, if you remember them, and continually present them before God (see p. 448), and pray for them, you will speedily blot them out; but if you forget them now, you will then be reminded of them even against your will, when they are brought out publicly before the whole world, displayed before all, both friends and enemies, and Angels. For surely He did not say to David only, What you did secretly, I will make manifest to 2 Samuel 12:12 all, but even to us all. You were afraid of men (he said) and respected them more than God; and God seeing you, you cared not, but were ashamed before men. For it says, the eyes of men, this is their fear. Therefore you shall suffer punishment in that very point; for I will reprove you, setting your sins before the eyes of all. For that this is true, and that in that day the sins of us all are [to be] publicly displayed, unless we now do them away by continual remembrance, hear how cruelty and inhumanity are publicly exposed, I was an hungered (He says) and you gave Me no meat. Matthew 25:42 When are these things said? Is it in a corner? Is it in a secret place? By no means. When then? When the Son of Man shall come in His glory Matthew 25:31-32, and all the nations are gathered together, when He has separated the one from the other, then will He speak in the audience of all, and will set them on His right hand and on His left Matthew 25:33: I was an hungered and you gave Me no meat.

See again the five virgins also, hearing before all, I know you not. Matthew 25:12 For the five and five do not set forth the number of five only, but those virgins who are wicked and cruel and inhuman, and those who are not such. So also he that buried his one talent, heard before all, even of those who had brought the five and the two, You wicked and slothful servant. Matthew 25:26 But not by words alone, but by deeds also does He then convict them: even as the Evangelist also says, They shall look on Him whom they pierced. John 19:37 For the resurrection shall be of all at the same time, of sinners and of the righteous. At the same time shall He be present to all in the judgment.

8. Consider therefore who they are who shall then be in dismay, who in grief, who dragged away to the fire, while the others are crowned. Come (He says), ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom which has been prepared for you from the foundation of the world. Matthew 25:34 And again, Depart from Me into the fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels. Matthew 25:41

Let us not merely hear the words but write them also before our sight, and let us imagine Him to be now present and saying these things, and that we are led away to that fire. What heart shall we have? What consolation? And what, when we are cut asunder? And what when we are accused of rapacity? What excuse shall we have to utter? What specious argument? None: but of necessity bound, bending down, we must be dragged to the mouths of the furnace, to the river of fire, to the darkness, to then ever-dying punishments, and entreat no one. For it is not, it is not possible, He says, to pass across from this side to that: for there is a great gulf between us and you Luke 16:26, and it is not possible even for those who wish it to go across, and stretch out a helping hand: but we must needs burn continually, no one aiding us, even should it be father or mother, or any whosoever, yea though he have much boldness toward God. For, it says, A brother does not redeem; shall man redeem? Psalm 49:8

Since then it is not possible to have one's hopes of salvation in another, but [it must be] in one's self after the lovingkindness of God, let us do all things, I entreat you, so that our conduct may be pure, and our course of life the best, and that it may not receive any stain even from the beginning. But if not, at all events, let us not sleep after the stain, but continue always washing away the pollution by repentance, by tears, by prayers, by works of mercy.

What then, you say, if I cannot do works of mercy? But you have a cup of cold water Matthew 10:42, however poor you are. But you have two mites Mark 12:42, in whatever poverty you are; but you have feet, so as to visit the sick, so as to enter into a prison; but you have a roof, so as to receive strangers. For there is no pardon, no, none for him who does not do works of mercy.

These things we say to you continually, that we may effect if it be but a little by the continued repetition: these things we say, not caring so much for those who receive the benefits, as for yourselves. For you give to them indeed things here, but in return you receive heavenly things: which may we all obtain, in Christ Jesus our Lord, with whom to the Father be glory, together with the Holy Ghost, now and ever, and world without end. Amen.

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