

Hebrews 13:17-25

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the importance of obedience, the role of rulers in the Christian community, and the need to cultivate virtue and be guided by the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: Matthew 23:2

Topics: "Church Leadership", "Spiritual Obedience"

Description

John Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of obeying and submitting to rulers, highlighting the dangers of anarchy, disobedience, and the impact of having wicked rulers. He encourages believers to focus on the teachings of their leaders rather than their personal lives, reminding them to follow good works and faith. Chrysostom urges rulers to watch over their flock diligently, warning them of the accountability they have for the souls under their care. He concludes by exhorting everyone to seek perfection in good works, to be mindful of God's will, and to allow the grace of God to work in them for His pleasure.

Transcript

Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves. For they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief, for this is unprofitable for you.

1. Anarchy is an evil, and the occasion of many calamities, and the source of disorder and confusion. For as, if you take away the leader from a chorus, the chorus will not be in tune and in order; and if from a phalanx of an army thou remove the commander, the evolutions will no longer be made in time and order, and if from a ship thou take away the helmsman, you will sink the vessel; so too if from a flock thou remove the shepherd, you have overthrown and destroyed all.

Anarchy then is an evil, and a cause of ruin. But no less an evil also is the disobedience to rulers. For it comes again to the same. For a people not obeying a ruler, is like one which has none; and perhaps even worse. For in the former case they have at least an excuse for disorder, but no longer in the latter, but are punished.

But perhaps some one will say, there is also a third evil, when the ruler is bad. I myself too know it, and no small evil it is, but even a far worse evil than anarchy. For it is better to be led by no one, than to be led by one who is evil. For the former indeed are oftentimes saved, and oftentimes are in peril, but the latter will be altogether in peril, being led into the pit [of destruction].

How then does Paul say, Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves? Having said above, whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation Hebrews ver. 7, he then said, Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves.

What then (you say), when he is wicked should we obey?

Wicked? In what sense? If indeed in regard to Faith, flee and avoid him; not only if he be a man, but even if he be an angel come down from Heaven; but if in regard to life, be not over-curious. And this instance I do not allege from my own mind, but from the Divine Scripture. For hear Christ saying, The Scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat. Matthew 23:2 Having previously spoken many fearful things concerning them, He then says, They sit on Moses' seat: all therefore whatsoever they tell you observe, do; but do not ye after their works. Matthew 23:2-3 They have (He means) the dignity of office, but are of unclean life. Do thou however attend, not to their life, but to their words. For as regards their characters, no one would be harmed [thereby]. How is this? Both because their characters are manifest to all, and also because though he were ten thousand times as wicked, he will never teach what is wicked. But as respects Faith, [the evil] is not manifest to all, and the wicked [ruler] will not shrink from teaching it.

Moreover, Judge not that you be not judged Matthew 7:1 concerns life, not faith: surely what follows makes this plain. For why (He says) do you behold the mote that is in your brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in your own eye? Matthew 7:3

All things therefore (He says) which they bid you observe, do ye (now to do belongs to works not to Faith) but do not ye after their works. Do you see that [the discourse] is not concerning doctrines, but concerning life and works?

2. Paul however previously commended them, and then says, Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves, for they watch for your souls, as they that shall give account.

Let those who rule also hear, and not only those who are under their rule; that as the subjects ought to be obedient, so also the rulers ought to be watchful and sober. What do you say? He watches; he imperils his own head; he is subject to the punishments of your sins, and for your sake is amenable to what is so fearful, and are you slothful, and affectedly indifferent, and at ease? Therefore he says, That they may do this with joy, and not with grief: for this is unprofitable for you.

Do you see that the despised ruler ought not to avenge himself, but his great revenge is to weep and lament? For neither is it possible for the physician, despised by his patient, to avenge himself, but to weep and lament. But if [the ruler] lament (he means), God inflicts vengeance on you. For if when we lament for our own sins we draw God to us, shall we not much rather [do this], when we lament for the arrogance and scornfulness of others? Do you see that he does not allow him to be led on to reproaches? Do you see how great is his philosophy? He ought to lament who is despised, is trodden under foot, is spit upon.

Be not confident because he does not avenge himself on you, for lamenting is worse than any revenge. For when of himself he profits nothing by lamenting, he calls on the Lord: and as in the case of a teacher and nurse, when the child does not listen to him, one is called in who will treat him more severely, so also in this case.

3. Oh! How great the danger! What should one say to those wretched men, who throw themselves upon so great an abyss of punishments? You have to give account of all over whom you rule, women and

children and men; into so great a fire do you put your head. I marvel if any of the rulers can be saved, when in the face of such a threat, and of the present indifference, I see some still even running on, and casting themselves upon so great a burden of authority.

For if they who are dragged by force have no refuge or defense, if they discharge duty ill and are negligent; since even Aaron was dragged by force, and yet was imperiled; and Moses again was imperiled, although he had oftentimes declined; and Saul having been entrusted with another kind of rule, after he had declined it, was in peril, because he managed it amiss; how much more they who take so great pains to obtain it, and cast themselves upon it? Such an one much more deprives himself of all excuse. For men ought to fear and to tremble, both because of conscience, and because of the burden of the office; and neither when dragged to it should they once for all decline, nor, when not dragged cast themselves upon it, but should even flee, foreseeing the greatness of the dignity; and when they have been seized, they ought again to show their godly fear. Let there be nothing out of measure. If you have perceived it beforehand, retire; convince yourself that you are unworthy of the office. Again, if you have been seized, in like manner be thou reverential, always showing rightmindedness.

Hebrews 13:18

4. Pray for us (he says); for we trust we have a good conscience among all, willing to live honestly.

You see that he used these apologies, as writing to persons grieved with him, as to those who turned away, who were disposed as towards a transgressor, not enduring even to hear his name? Inasmuch then as he asked from those who hated him what all others ask from those who love them [their prayers for him], therefore he here introduces this; saying, We trust that we have a good conscience. For do not tell me of accusations; our conscience, he says, in nothing hurts us; nor are we conscious to ourselves that we have plotted against you. For we trust, he says, that we have a good conscience among all, not among the Gentiles only, but also among you. We have done nothing with deceitfulness, nothing with hypocrisy: for it was probable that these [calumnies] were reported respecting him. For they have been informed concerning you (it is said) that you teach apostasy. Acts 21:21 Not as an enemy, he means, nor as an adversary I write these things, but as a friend. And this he shows also by what follows.

Hebrews 13:19

But I beseech you the rather to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner. His thus praying was [the act] of one who loved them greatly, and that not simply, but with all earnestness, that so, he says, I may come to you speedily. The earnest desire to come to them is [the mark] of one conscious to himself of nothing [wrong], also the entreating them to pray for him.

Therefore having first asked their prayers, he then himself also prays for all good things on them.

Hebrews 13:20-21

Now the God of peace, he says (be ye not therefore at variance one with another), that brought again from the earth the Shepherd of the sheep Hebrews 13:20 (this is said concerning the resurrection) the Great [Shepherd] (another addition: here again he confirms to them even to the end, his discourse concerning the Resurrection) through the blood of the everlasting covenant, our Lord Jesus Christ, Hebrews 13:21 make you perfect in every good work, to do His will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in His sight.

Again he bears high testimony to them. For that is made perfect which having a beginning is afterwards completed. And he prays for them which is the act of one who yearns for them. And while in the other Epistles, he prays in the prefaces, here he does it at the end. Working in you, he says, that which is well-pleasing in His sight through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Hebrews 13:22-23

5. And I beseech you, brethren, suffer the word of exhortation, for indeed I have written a letter unto you in few words. Do you see that what he wrote to no one [else], he writes to them? For (he means) I do not even trouble you with long discourse.

I suppose that they were not at all unfavorably disposed towards Timothy: wherefore he also put him forward. For Hebrews 13:23 know ye, he says, that our brother Timothy is set at liberty, with whom, if he come shortly, I will see you. Set at liberty, he says; from whence? I suppose he had been cast into prison: or if not this, that he was sent away from Athens. For this also is mentioned in the Acts.

Hebrews 13:24-25

Salute all them that have the rule over you, and all the saints. They of Italy salute you. Grace be with you all. Amen.

6. Seest thou how he shows that virtue is born neither wholly from God, nor yet from ourselves alone? First by saying, make you perfect in every good work; You have virtue indeed, he means, but need to be made complete. What is good work and word? So as to have both life and doctrines right. According to His will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in His sight.

In His sight, he says. For this is the highest virtue, to do that which is well-pleasing in the sight of God, as the Prophet also says, And according to the cleanness of my hands in His eye-sight. Psalm 18:24

And having written thus much, he said this was little, in comparison with what he was going to say. As he says also in another place, As I wrote to you in few words: whereby when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ. Ephesians 3:3-4

And observe his wisdom. He says not, I beseech you, suffer the word of admonition, but the word of exhortation, that is, of consolation, of encouragement. No one, he means, can be wearied at the length of what has been said (Did this then make them turn away from him? By no means: he does not indeed wish to express this): that is, even if you be of little spirit, for it is the peculiarity of such persons not to endure a long discourse.

Know ye that our brother Timothy is set at liberty, with whom if he come shortly I will see you. This is enough to persuade them to submit themselves, if he is ready to come with his disciple.

Salute them that have the rule over you, and all the saints. See how he honored them, since he wrote to them instead of to those [their rulers].

They of Italy salute you. Grace be with you all. Amen. Which was for them all in common.

But how does Grace come to be with us? If we do not do despite to the benefit, if we do not become indolent in regard to the Gift. And what is the grace? Remission of sins, Cleansing: this is with us. For who (he means) can keep the Grace despitefully, and not destroy it? For instance; He freely forgave you your

sins. How then shall the Grace be with you, whether it be the good favor or the effectual working of the Spirit? If you draw it to you by good deeds. For the cause of all good things is this, the continual abiding with us of the grace of the Spirit. For this guides us to all [good things], just as when it flies away from us, it ruins us, and leaves us desolate.

7. Let us not then drive it from us. For on ourselves depends, both its remaining, and its departing. For the one results, when we mind heavenly things; the other, when [we mind] the things of this life. Which the world (He says) cannot receive because it sees Him not, neither knows Him. John 14:17 Do you see that a worldly soul cannot have Him? We need great earnestness that so there He may be held fast by us, so as to direct all our affairs, and do them in security, and in much peace.

For as a ship sailing with favorable winds is neither to be hindered nor sunk, so long as it enjoys a prosperous and steady breeze, but also causes great admiration according to the march of its progress both to the mariners, and to the passengers, giving rest to the one, and not forcing them to toil on at their oars, and setting the others free from all fear, and giving them the most delightful view of her course; so too a soul strengthened by the Divine Spirit, is far above all the billows of this life, and more strongly than the ship, cuts the way bearing on to Heaven, since it is not sent along by wind, but has all the pure sails filled by the Paraclete Himself: and He casts out of our minds all that is slackened and relaxed.

For as the wind if it fall upon a slackened sail, would have no effect; so neither does the Spirit endure to continue in a slack soul; but there is need of much tension, of much vehemence, so that our mind may be on fire, and our conduct under all circumstances on the stretch, and braced up. For instance when we pray, we ought to do it with much intentness, stretching forth the soul toward Heaven, not with cords, but with great earnestness. Again when we do works of mercy, we have need of intentness, lest by any means, thought for our household, and care for children, and anxiety about wife, and fear of poverty entering in, should slacken our sail. For if we put it on the stretch on all sides by the hope of the things to come, it receives well the energy of the Spirit; and none of those perishable and wretched things will fall upon it, yea, and if any of them should fall, it does it no harm, but is quickly thrown back by the tightness, and is shaken off and fails down.

Therefore we have need of much intentness. For we too are sailing over a great and wide sea, full of many monsters, and of many rocks, and bringing forth for us many storms, and from the midst of serene weather raising up a most violent tempest. It is necessary then if we would sail with ease, and without danger, to stretch the sails, that is, our determination: for this is sufficient for us. For Abraham also, when he had stretched forth his affections towards God and set before Him his fixed resolution, what else had he need of? Nothing: but he believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Genesis 15:6 But Faith [comes] of a sincere will. He offered up his son, and though he did not slay him, he received a recompense as if he had slain him, and though the work was not done the reward was given.

Let our sails then be in good order, not grown old (for everything that is decayed and waxen old is near to vanishing away) Hebrews 8:13, not worn into holes, that so they may bear the energy of the Spirit . For the natural man, it is said, receives not the things of the Spirit. 1 Corinthians 2:14 For as the webs of spiders could not receive a blast of wind, so neither will the soul devoted to this life, nor the natural man ever be able to receive the grace of the Spirit: for our reasonings differ nothing from them, preserving a connection in appearance only but destitute of all power.

8. Our condition, however, is not such, if we are watchful: but whatever may fall upon [the Christian], he bears all, and is above all, stronger than any whirlpool. For suppose there be a spiritual man, and that innumerable calamities befall him, yet is he overcome by none of them. And what do I say? Let poverty come upon him, disease, insults, revilings, mockings, stripes, every sort of infliction, every sort of mocking, and slanders, and insults: yet, as though he were outside the world, and set free from the feelings of the body, so will he laugh all to scorn.

And that my words are not mere boasting, I think many [such] exist even now; for instance, of those who have embraced the life of the desert. This however, you say, is nothing wonderful. But I say that of those also who live in cities, there are such men unsuspected. If you wish however, I shall be able to exhibit some among those of old. And that you may learn, consider Paul, I pray you. What is there fearful that he did not suffer, and that he did not submit to? But he bore all nobly. Let us imitate him, for so shall we be able to land in the tranquil havens with much merchandise.

Let us then stretch our mind towards Heaven, let us be held fast by that desire, let us clothe ourselves with spiritual fire, let us gird ourselves with its flame. No man who bears flame fears those who meet him; be it wild beast, be it man, be it snares innumerable, so long as he is armed with fire, all things stand out of his way, all things retire. The flame is intolerable, the fire cannot be endured, it consumes all.

With this fire let us clothe ourselves, offering up glory to our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom to the Father, together with the Holy Ghost, be glory, might, honor, now and ever and world without end. Amen.

Thanks be to God.

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