

Hebrews 4:11-16

by St. John Chrysostom

We must labor to enter into rest, lest we fall, and we must approach the throne of grace boldly, with confidence, to obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Topics: "Faith And Works", "Christian Living"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of faith and a right way of living to enter into God's rest, emphasizing the need for earnestness and diligence in our Christian journey. He warns against falling into unbelief and highlights the power of the Word of God to discern our thoughts and intentions. Chrysostom urges believers to approach God boldly through Jesus, our High Priest, who sympathizes with our weaknesses and provides grace and mercy in times of need.

Transcript

Let us labor therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief. For the word of God is quick [i.e. living] and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart, neither is there any creature that is not manifest in His sight, but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

1. Faith is indeed great and brings salvation, and without it, it is not possible ever to be saved. It suffices not however of itself to accomplish this, but there is need of a right conversation also. So that on this account Paul also exhorts those who had already been counted worthy of the mysteries; saying, Let us labor to enter into that rest. Let us labor (he says), Faith not sufficing, the life also ought to be added thereto, and our earnestness to be great; for truly there is need of much earnestness too, in order to go up into Heaven. For if they who suffered so great distress in the Wilderness, were not counted worthy of [the promised] land, and were not able to attain [that] land, because they murmured and because they committed fornication: how shall we be counted worthy of Heaven, if we live carelessly and indolently? We then have need of much earnestness.

And observe, the punishment does not extend to this only, the not entering in (for he said not, Let us labor to enter into the rest, lest we fail of so great blessings), but he added what most of all arouses men. What then is this? Lest any man fall, after the same example of unbelief. What means this? It means that we should have our mind, our hope, our expectation, yonder, lest we should fail. For that [otherwise] we shall fail, the example shows, lest [&c.] after the same, he says.

2. In the next place, lest hearing [the words] after the same [example], you should think that the punishment is the same, hear what he adds; For the Word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and pierces even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. In these words he shows that He, the Word of God, wrought the former things also, and lives, and has not been quenched.

Do not then when hearing the Word, think of it lightly. For He is sharper, he says, than a sword. Observe His condescension; and hence consider why the prophets also needed to speak of saber and bow and sword. If you turn not, it is said, He will whet His sword, He has bent His bow and made it ready. Psalm 7:12 For if now, after so long a time, and after their being perfected, He cannot smite down by the name of the Word alone, but needs these expressions in order to show the superiority [arising] from the comparison [of the Gospel with the law]: much more then [of old].

Piercing, he says, even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit. What is this? He hinted at something more fearful. Either that He divides the spirit from the soul, or that He pierces even through them disembodied, not as a sword through bodies only. Here he shows, that the soul also is punished, and that it thoroughly searches out the most inward things, piercing wholly through the whole man.

And is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart, neither is there any creature that is not manifest in His sight. In these words most of all he terrified them. For do not (he says) be confident if you still stand fast in the Faith, but without full assurance. He judges the inner heart, for there He passes through, both punishing and searching out.

And why speak I of men? He says. For even if you speak of Angels, of Archangels, of the Cherubim, of the Seraphim, even of any creature whatsoever: all things are laid open to that Eye, all things are clear and manifest; there is nothing able to escape it; All things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him, with whom we have to do.

But what is opened ? [It is] a metaphor from the skins which are drawn off from the victims. For as in that case, when a man has killed them, and has drawn aside the skin from the flesh, he lays open all the inward parts, and makes them manifest to our eyes; so also do all things lie open before God. And observe, I pray you, how he constantly needs bodily images; which arose from the weakness of the hearers. For that they were weak, he made plain, when he said that they were dull, and had need of milk, not of strong meat. All things are naked, he says, and opened unto the eyes of Him, with whom we have to do. c. v. 11, 12

3. But what is, after the same example of unbelief? As if one should say, why did they of old not see the land? They had received an earnest of the power of God; they ought to have believed, but yielding too much to fear and imagining nothing great concerning God, and being faint-hearted -- so they perished. And there is also something more to be said, as, that after they had accomplished the most part of the journey, when they were at the very doors, at the haven itself, they were sunk into the sea. This I fear (he says) for you also. This is [the meaning of] after the same example of unbelief.

For that these also [to whom he is writing] had suffered much, he afterwards testifies, saying, Call to mind the former days, in which after that you had been enlightened, you endured a great fight of afflictions. Hebrews 10:32 Let no man then be faint-hearted, nor fall down near the end through weariness. For there are, there are those who at the beginning engage in the fight with the full vigor of zeal; but a little after, not being willing to add to all, they lose all. Your forefathers (he says) are sufficient to instruct you not to fall

into the same [sins], not to suffer the same things which they suffered. This is, After the same example of unbelief. Let us not faint, he means (which he says also near the end [of the Epistle]. Lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees): lest any man, he says, fall after the same example. Hebrews 12:12 For this is to fall indeed.

Then, lest when you hear, any man fall after the same example, you should conceive of the same death which they also underwent, see what he says: For the Word of God is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword. For the Word falls upon the souls of these [men] more severely than any sword, causing grievous wounds; and inflicts fatal blows. And of these things he need not give the proof, nor establish them by argument, having a history so fearful. For (he would say) what kind of war destroyed them? What sort of sword? Did they not fall simply of themselves? For let us not be careless because we have not suffered the same things. While it is called Today, it is in our power to recover ourselves.

For lest on hearing the things that belong to the soul we should grow negligent, he adds also what concerns the body. For then it is as a king, when his officers are guilty of some great fault, first strips them (say) of their command, and after depriving them of their belt, and their rank, and their herald, then punishes them: so also in this case the sword of the Spirit works.

4. Next he discourses of the Son, with whom we have to do, he says. What is with whom we have to do? To Him (he would say) we have to render account for the things we have done? Even so. How then [must we act] that we fall not, nor be faint-hearted?

These things indeed (he would say) are sufficient to instruct us. But we have also a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God. Because he added [it], for this reason he went on, For we have not an High Priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities. Therefore he said above, In that He has suffered Himself being tempted, He is able to succor them which are tempted. See then how here also he does the same. And what he says is to this effect: He went (he says) the road which we also [are going] now, or rather even a more rugged one. For He had experience of all human [sufferings].

Hebrews 4:14

He had said above There is no creature that is not manifest in His sight, intimating His Godhead; then, since he had touched on the flesh, he again discourses more condescendingly, saying Hebrews 4:14, Having then a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens: and shows that His care is greater and that He protects them as His own, and would not have them fall away. For Moses indeed (he says) did not enter into the rest, while He [Christ] did enter in. And it is wonderful how he has nowhere stated the same, lest they might seem to find an excuse; he however implied it, but that he might not appear to bring an accusation against the man, he did not say it openly. For if, when none of these things had been said, they yet brought forward these [charges], saying, This man has spoken against Moses and against the law see Acts 21:21, 28; much more, if he had said, It is not Palestine but Heaven, would they have said stronger things than these.

5. But he attributes not all to the Priest, but requires also what is [to come] from us, I mean our profession. For having, he says, a great High Priest, who is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession [or confession]. What sort of profession does he mean? That there is a Resurrection, that there is a retribution: that there are good things innumerable; that Christ is God, that the Faith is right. These things let us profess, these things let us hold fast. For that they are true, is manifest

from the fact, that the High Priest is within. We have not failed of [our hopes], let us confess; although the realities are not present, yet let us confess: if already they were present they were but a lie. So that this also is true, that [our good things] are deferred. For our High Priest also is Great.

Hebrews 4:15

For we have not an High Priest, who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities. He is not (he means) ignorant of what concerns us, as many of the High Priests, who know not those in tribulations, nor that there is tribulation at any time. For in the case of men it is impossible that one should know the affliction of the afflicted who has not had experience, and gone through the actual sensations. Our High Priest endured all things. Therefore He endured first and then ascended, that He might be able to sympathize with us.

But was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Observe how both above he has used the word in like manner, and here after the likeness. Hebrews 2:14 That is, He was persecuted, was spit upon, was accused, was mocked at, was falsely informed against, was driven out, at last was crucified.

After our likeness, without sin. In these words another thing also is suggested, that it is possible even for one in afflictions to go through them without sin. So that when he says also in the likeness of flesh Romans 8:3, he means not that He took on Him [merely] the likeness of flesh, but flesh. Why then did he say in the likeness? Because he was speaking about sinful flesh: for it was like our flesh, since in nature it was the same with us, but in sin no longer the same.

Hebrews 4:16

6. Let us come then boldly [with confidence] unto the throne of His grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

What throne of grace is he speaking of? That royal throne concerning which it is said, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit on My right hand. Psalm 110:1

What is let us come boldly? Because we have a sinless High Priest contending with the world. For, says He, Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world John 16:33; for, this is to suffer all things, and yet to be pure from sins. Although we (he means) are under sin, yet He is sinless.

How is it that we should approach boldly? Because now it is a throne of Grace, not a throne of Judgment. Therefore boldly, that we may obtain mercy, even such as we are seeking. For the affair is [one of] munificence, a royal largess.

And may find grace to help in time of need [for help in due season]. He well said, for help in time of need. If you approach now (he means) you will receive both grace and mercy, for you approach in due season; but if you approach then, no longer [will you receive it]. For then the approach is unseasonable, for it is not then a throne of Grace. Till that time He sits granting pardon, but when the end [has come], then He rises up to judgment. For it is said, Arise, O God, judge the earth. Psalm 82:8 (Let us come boldly, or he says again having no evil conscience, that is, not being in doubt, for such an one cannot come with boldness.) On this account it is said, I have heard you in an accepted time and in a day of salvation have I succored you. 2 Corinthians 6:2 Since even now for those to find repentance who sin after baptism is of grace.

But lest when you hear of an High Priest, you should think that He stands, he immediately leads to the throne. But a Priest does not sit, but stands. Do you see that [for Him] to be made High Priest, is not of nature, but of grace and condescension, and humiliation?

This is it seasonable for us also now to say, Let us draw near asking boldly: let us only bring Faith and He gives all things. Now is the time of the gift; let no man despair of himself. Then [will be] the time of despairing, when the bride-chamber is shut, when the King has come in to see the guests, when they who shall be accounted worthy thereof, shall have received as their portion the Patriarch's bosom: but now it is not as yet so. For still are the spectators assembled, still is the contest, still is the prize in suspense.

7. Let us then be earnest. For even Paul says, I so run not as uncertainly. 1 Corinthians 9:26 There is need of running, and of running vehemently. He that runs [a race] sees none of those that meet him; whether he be passing through meadows, or through dry places: he that runs looks not at the spectators, but at the prize. Whether they be rich or whether they be poor, whether one mock at him, or praise him, whether one insult, or cast stones at him, or plunder his house, whether he see children, or wife, or anything whatever. He is occupied in one thing alone, in running, in gaining the prize. He that runs, never stands still, since even if he slacken a little, he has lost the whole. He that runs, not only slackens nothing before the end, but then even especially strains his speed.

This have I spoken for those who say; In our younger days we used discipline, in our younger days we fasted, now we are grown old. Now most of all it behooves you to make your carefulness more intense. Do not count up to me the old things especially done well: be now youthful and vigorous. For he that runs this bodily race, when gray hairs have overtaken him, probably is not able to run as he did before: for the whole contest depends on the body; but thou -- wherefore do you lessen your speed? For in this race there is need of a soul, a soul thoroughly awakened: and the soul is rather strengthened in old age; then it is in its full vigor, then is it in its pride.

For as the body, so long as it is oppressed by fevers and by one sickness after another, even if it be strong, is exhausted, but when it is freed from this attack, it recovers its proper force, so also the soul in youth is feverish, and is chiefly possessed by the love of glory, and luxurious living, and sensual lusts, and many other imaginations; but old age, when it comes on, drives away all these passions, some through satiety, some through philosophy. For old age relaxes the powers of the body, and does not permit the soul to make use of them even if it wish, but repressing them as enemies of various kinds, it sets her in a place free from troubles and produces a great calm, and brings in a greater fear.

For if none else does, it is said, yet they who are grown old know, that they are drawing to their end, and that they certainly stand near to death. When therefore the desires of this life are withdrawing, and the expectation of the judgment-seat is coming on, softening the stubbornness of the soul, does it not become more attentive, if one be willing?

8. What then (you allege) when we see old men more intractable than young ones? Thou tellest me of an excess of wickedness. For in the case of madmen too, we see them going over precipices, when no man pushes them. When therefore, an old man has the diseases of the young, this is an excess of wickedness; besides not even in youth would such an one have an excuse: since he is not able to say, Remember not the sins of my youth, and my ignorances. Psalm 25:7 For he who in old age remains the same, shows that even in youth, he was what he was not from ignorance, nor from inexperience, nor from the time of life, but from slothfulness. For that man may say, Remember not the sins of my youth, and mine ignorances, who

does such things as become an old man, who changes in old age. But if even in age he continue the same unseemly courses, how can such an one be worthy of the name of an old man, who has no reverence even for the time of life? For he who says, Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my ignorances, utters this, as one doing right in his old age. Do not then, by the deeds of age, deprive yourself also of pardon for the sins of youth.

For how can what is done be otherwise than unreasonable, and beyond pardon? An old man sits in taverns. An old man hurries to horse-races -- an old man goes up into theaters, running with the crowd like children. Truly it is a shame and a mockery, to be adorned outside with gray hairs, but within to have the mind of a child.

And indeed if a young man insult [him], he immediately puts forward his gray hairs. Reverence them first yourself; if however thou dost not reverence your own even when old, how can you demand of the young to reverence them? Thou dost not reverence the gray hairs, but puttest them to shame. God has honored you with whiteness of hairs: He has given you high dignity. Why do you betray the honor? How shall the young man reverence you, when you are more wanton than he? For the hoary head is then venerable, when it acts worthily of the gray head; but when it plays youth, it will be more ridiculous than the young. How then will you old men be able to give these exhortations to the young man when you are intoxicated by your disorderliness?

9. I say not these things as accusing the old, but the young. For in my judgment they who act thus even if they have come to their hundredth year, are young; just as the young if they be but little children, yet if they are sober-minded, are better than the old. And this doctrine is not my own, but Scripture also recognizes the same distinction. For, it says, honorable age is not that which stands in length of time, and an unspotted life is old age. Wisdom 4:8-9

For we honor the gray hair, not because we esteem the white color above the black, but because it is a proof of a virtuous life; and when we see them we conjecture therefrom the inward hoariness. But if men continue to do what is inconsistent with the hoary head, they will on that account become the more ridiculous. Since we also honor the Emperor, and the purple and the diadem, because they are symbols of his office. But if we should see him, with the purple, spitted on, trodden under foot by the guards, seized by the throat, cast into prison, torn to pieces, shall we then reverence the purple or the diadem, and not rather weep over the pomp itself? Claim not then to be honored for your hoary head, when you yourself wrongest it. For it ought indeed itself to receive satisfaction from you, because you bring disgrace on a form so noble and so honorable.

We say not these things against all [old persons], nor is our discourse against old age simply (I am not so mad as that), but against a youthful spirit bringing dishonor on old age. Nor is it concerning those who are grown old that we sorrowfully say these things, but concerning those who disgrace the hoary head.

For the old man is a king, if you will, and more royal than he who wears the purple, if he master his passions, and keep them under subjection, in the rank of guards. But if he be dragged about and thrust down from his throne, and become a slave of the love of money, and vainglory, and personal adornment, and luxuriousness, and drunkenness, anger, and sensual pleasures, and has his hair dressed out with oil, and shows an age insulted by his way of life, of what punishment would not such an one be worthy?

10. But may you not be such, O young men! For not even for you is there the excuse for sinning. Why so? Because it is possible to be old in youth: just as there are youths in old age, so also the reverse. For as in

the one case the white hair saves no one, so in the other the black is no impediment. For if it is disgraceful for the old man to do these things of which I have spoken, much more than for the young man, yet still the young man is not freed from accusation. For a young man can have an excuse only, in case he is called to the management of affairs, when he is still inexperienced, when he needs time and practice; but no longer when it is necessary to display temperance and courage, nor yet when it is needful to keep his property.

For it sometimes happens that the young man is blamed more than the old. For the one needs much service, old age making him feeble: but the other being able, if he will, to provide for himself, what sort of excuse should he meet with, when he plunders more than the old, when he remembers injuries, when he is contemptuous, when he does not stand forward to protect others more than the old man, when he utters many things unseasonably, when he is insolent, when he reviles, when he is drunken?

And if in the [matter of] chastity he think that he cannot be impleaded, consider that here also he has many helps, if he will. For although desire trouble him more violently than it does the old, yet nevertheless there are many things which he can do more than an old man, and so charm that wild beast. What are these things? Labors, readings, watchings through the night, fastings.

11. What then are these things to us (one says) who are not monastics? Do you say this to me? Say it to Paul, when he says, Watching with all perseverance and supplication Ephesians 6:18, when he says, Make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof. Romans 13:14 For surely he wrote not these things to solitaries only, but to all that are in cities. For ought the man who lives in the world to have any advantage over the solitary, save only the living with a wife? In this point he has allowance, but in others none, but it is his duty to do all things equally with the solitary.

Moreover the Beatitudes [pronounced] by Christ, were not addressed to solitaries only: since in that case the whole world would have perished, and we should be accusing God of cruelty. And if these beatitudes were spoken to solitaries only, and the secular person cannot fulfill them, yet He permitted marriage, then He has destroyed all men. For if it be not possible, with marriage, to perform the duties of solitaries, all things have perished and are destroyed, and the [functions] of virtue are shut up in a strait.

And, how can marriage be honorable, which so hinders us? What then? It is possible, yea very possible, even if we have wives, to pursue after virtue, if we will. How? If having wives, we be as though we had none, if we rejoice not over our possessions, if we use the world as not abusing it. 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

And if any persons have been hindered by marriage state, let them know that marriage is not the hindrance, but their purpose which made an ill use of marriage. Since it is not wine which makes drunkenness, but the evil purpose, and the using it beyond due measure. Use marriage with moderation, and you shall be first in the kingdom, and shall enjoy all good things, which may we all attain by the grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ 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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